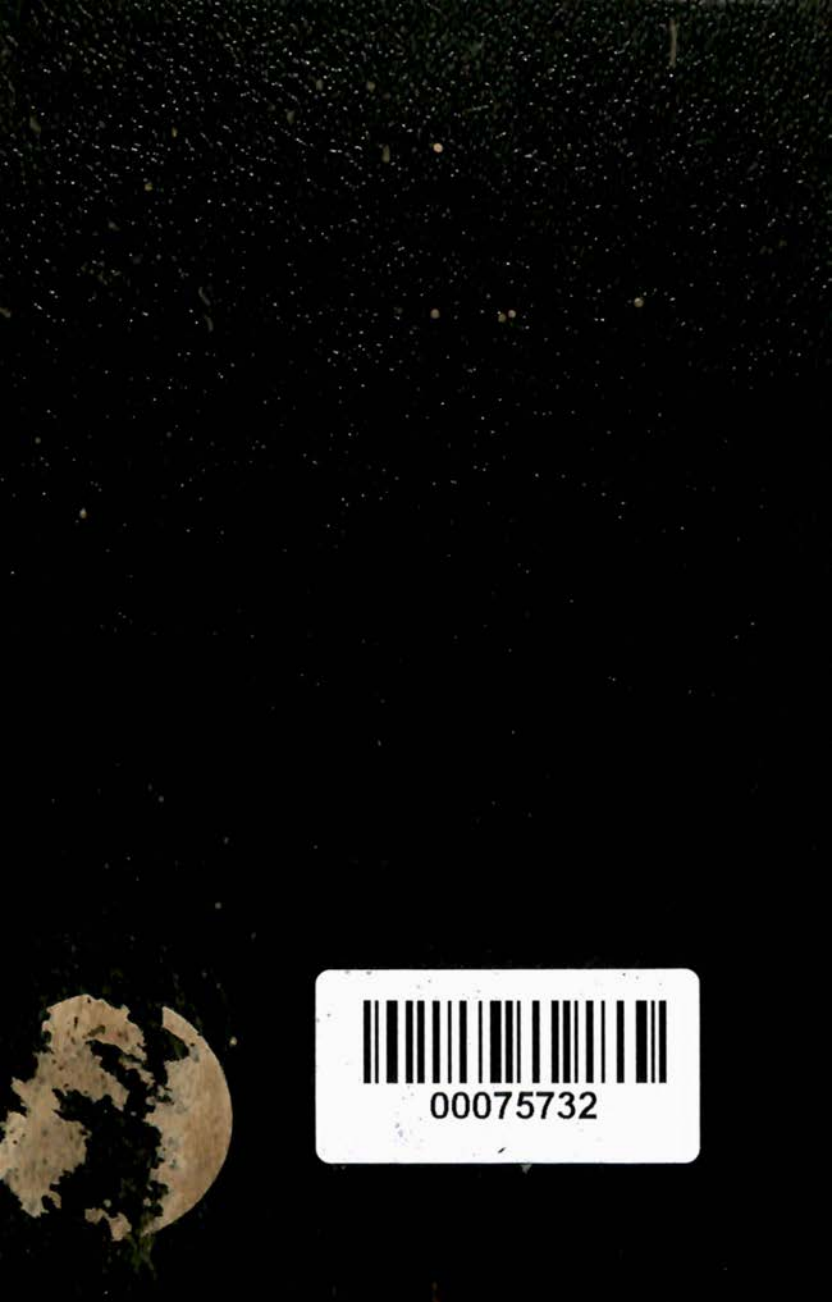

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RED AS A ROSE IS SHE.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"COMETH UP AS A FLOWER."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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X.6.650

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.
1870.

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LONDON:
Printed by A. Schulze, 13, Poland Street.

RED AS A ROSE IS SHE.

CHAPTER I.

I THINK that people's value, or want of value is seldom their own: it belongs rather to the circumstances that surround them—to attributes foreign to themselves —outside of them. Had Robinson Crusoe, while walking down Bond Street in flowing wig and lace ruffles, first met his man Friday, he might have tossed him sixpence to avoid his importunities; but would hardly have taken him into intimate friendship—would hardly even have admitted him as a man and a brother. Among the blind the one-eyed is king, and among a crowd of total strangers an acquaintance rises into a friend.

Lonely Esther is half-inclined to effect this metamorphosis in the case of Miss Blessington. The mere fact of having eaten, drank, and slept for a considerable period under the same roof with her—the bare fact of having lived with and disliked her during a whole month and more—was enough recommendation in a house not one of whose inmates had she ever beheld before. Almost as a friend has she greeted her this morning. With admiration most unfeigned, though made a little bitter by mental comparison with her own dimmed, grief-blighted beauty, has she regarded the stately woman, the splendid animal, sleek and white as a sacred Egyptian cow: the brilliancy of whose pale bright hair, and the perfect smoothness of her great satin throat, are heightened by the sober richness of her creaseless black velvet dress. Voluptuous, yet cold, the passions that her splendid physique provoke are chilled to death by the passionless stupor of her soul. I am not at all sure that im-

passioned ugliness—supposing the ugliness to be moderate, and the passion immoderate—has not more attraction for the generality of men than iced beauty.

Esther's warmth is thrown away; she might as well expect that the "Venus de Medici" would return the pressure of warm clinging fingers with her freezing, sculptured hand.

"I was so glad to find you here last night: it was so pleasant to see a face one knew," Miss Craven says, with the rash credulity of youth unexpectant of snubs.

Miss Blessington looks slightly surprised. "Tha—anks; it is very good of you to say so, I am sure," she answers, rather drawlingly, and with a small cold smile that would repress demonstrations much more violent than any that Esther had meditated. It is difficult *always* to remember that one is a "companion."

The Blessington dining-room is, like the other reception-rooms, huge and very nobly proportioned. Did we not know

that our seventeenth and eighteenth century ancestors were not giants, we should be prone to imagine that it must have been a race of Anakims that required such great wide spaces to sup, and sip chocolate, and play at ombre in. The furniture is in its dotage; it has, figuratively speaking, like its owners, lost hair and teeth, and all unnecessary etceteras; it is reduced to the bare elements of existence. Three tall windows look out upon a flat lawn, and in the middle of this lawn, exactly opposite Esther's eyes, as she sits at breakfast, is an unique and chaste piece of statuary, entitled "The Rape of the Sabines." The space afforded by the stone pediment is necessarily limited, and consequently Roman and Sabines, gentlemen and lady, are all piled one a-top of another in such inextricable confusion as to demand a good quarter of an hour's close observation to determine which of the muscular writhing legs belong to the Roman ravisher and which to the injured Sabine husband. As

the sculptor has given none of his *protégées* any clothing, the snow has been kind enough to throw a modest white mantle over them all.

"Mr. and Mrs. Blessington do not come down to breakfast?" says Esther, interrogatively, as the two girls seat themselves at table.

"No; they breakfast in their own rooms."

"I suppose," says Esther, with some embarrassment, "that they will send for me if they want me for anything, won't they? Perhaps" (with diffidence)—"perhaps you will kindly tell me the sort of things they will want me to do?"

"My uncle will be down presently," answered Miss Blessington, "and he will then expect you to read to him until luncheon."

"To read what? The Bible?" inquired Esther, who has a vague idea that the Bible is the only form in which literature should employ the attention of the aged.

"The Bible? Oh dear, no!" (with a little laugh). "The papers: the *Times*, *Saturday*, and *Justice of the Peace*, are his favourites; he takes a great, a *remarkable* interest, considering his age, in politics."

"I like reading aloud," says Esther, resolute to look on the bright side.

"Reading aloud to my uncle is very fatiguing," replies Constance, cheeringly: "one has to sustain one's voice at a pitch several octaves higher than the natural one. I attempted reading to him once or twice, but it affected my throat so much that I had to leave off," she ends, with a little lackadaisical cough.

"I daresay it won't affect mine," rejoins the other, rather drily.

There is a pause. Talking is a vice to which Miss Blessington is nowise addicted —more especially objectless talking to a little person of the feminine gender who is not one of *nous autres*.

"I hope," says Esther, presently, trust-

ing to the obtuseness of her companion's perceptions not to discover the flagrant hypocrisy of the question—"I hope that Sir Thomas was quite well when you left Felton?"

"Quite—thanks."

"And Lady Gerard?"

"Yes—thanks."

"And—and" (bending down her head in the vain endeavour to screen the red blush that the frosty sun, flaming in through the window opposite, makes obtrusively evident)—"and Mr. Gerard?"

"He is *very* well—thanks," replies Miss Blessington, with the conscious smile that had formerly exasperated Esther, and with an emphasis not common with her.

Miss Blessington does not usually employ emphasis: it is *mezzoceto*, as is enthusiasm of which it is the exponent.

Half an hour later Esther is sitting beside the old squire, as close as possible to his best ear, brandishing the *Times's* giant squares in her unaccustomed hand.

The old squire is a superb wreck. Spiteful Time is fond of removing the landmarks that youth sets upon our faces; is fond of changing great, clear, almond eyes into little damp jellies—sweet moist purse-mouths into dry bags of wrinkles; but it is a task beyond even *his* power to destroy the shape of that grand old bent head—to deface the outlines of that thin-nostriled patrician nose.

"What shall I read first?" asks the young girl, timidly, but enunciating each syllable with painstaking slowness and clearness.

"The State of the Funds," replies the old gentleman, promptly, thrusting his hand into his breast, and closing his eyes, in his favourite attitude.

Esther has not the most distant idea where the "State of the Funds" lives: she turns the huge sheets topsy-turvy—inside out, outside in—in the vain search for their habitat, making, meanwhile, the most unjustifiable aggressive rustling and

crackling, which she presumptuously trusts to his deafness not to hear.

"Don't make such an infernal crackling, my dear!" he says presently, with some pettishness.

"I thought you could not hear," she unwisely answers, trembling.

"God bless my soul, child! The dead would have heard the noise you were making," he rejoins, snappishly.

Having at length mastered the fact that the "State of the Funds" comes under the head of "Money Market and City Intelligence," Esther gives the desired information. Then follows a leader:

"The position of American politics is at this moment peculiarly perplexing and anomalous; so perplexing that even those English observers who, like ourselves, have given a careful and constant attention to the course of the Transatlantic movement since the first appearance of Secession, can hardly pretend clearly to understand——"

"Pretend clearly to *what?* For God's sake don't gabble so!"

"Can—hardly—pretend—clearly—to—understand—the—full—meaning—of—the situation,—and—must—feel—that—it—would—be——"

"Is there no medium, may I ask, between gabbling and drawling?"

"And must feel that it would be rash to express a confident opinion thereupon."

Esther now proceeds for a considerable period unchecked—gradually and unconsciously relapsing into the brisk gallop so dear to youth when engaged upon a subject that does not interest it. Suddenly a deep slumberous breath, drawn close to her ear, makes her aware that her hearer has lapsed into sleep.

"I have read him to sleep," she says to herself, with a sort of triumphant feeling at her own prowess, taking furtive glances at the wrinkled profile, sunk, in perfect imbecility of slumber on his breast.

Not feeling any particular personal in-

terest in the effect of Secession upon American politics, she stops, and gazes vacantly out of-window at the "Rape of the Sabines." But the cessation of the sweet monotony that lulled him, arouses the old man.

"Go on!—go on!" he cries, fussily, lifting his head and opening his dim eyes. "What are you stopping for? Read that paragraph over again; you read it so fast that I could not quite follow the meaning of it."

She complies, and so, with dozing and waking, waking and dozing, on one side, reading and stopping, stopping and reading on the other, the little drama plays itself out till nearly luncheon-time.

"We are going to drive into Shelford this afternoon; do you feel inclined to come with us, Constance, my dear?" asks the old lady, as they quit the luncheon-table—Esther dutifully bringing up the rear, with air-cushion, footstool, and *couvre-pied.*

"Not to-day, aunt, I think—thanks," answers Constance, with the utmost sweetness; the "Not to-day" seeming to imply that on some future morrow she will gladly avail herself of the invitation to join her elderly relatives in their *triste* airing; but Miss Blessington being in her generation a wise woman, that morrow never comes.

The old family-coach rolls round the frosty sweep to the door; two large horses, sleek and fat with over-many oats and over-little work, draw it.

> "The tails of both hung down behind,
> Their shoes were on their feet."

"Give me your arm, Miss Craven; one is very apt to fall this frosty weather," says the old lady, appearing at the door, transformed, by the aid of numberless cloaks and shawls, and a huge velvet bonnet, date anno domini, into a large and perfectly shapeless bundle.

Supported on one side by Esther's slender arm, and on the other by the

florid and plethoric butler, she is hoisted up the three steps into the body of the ancient machine, which is painted invisible green, and hung marvellous high in air. The same course is pursued with the old gentleman, who, muffled, comfortered, and scarved up to the tip of his venerable nose, follows. Lastly, the young prop steps in, and sits down humbly with her back to the horses — a process which usually ends in making her sick. The windows are shut tight up; a great hot skin of some wild beast is thrown over their knees; in that confined atmosphere it emits a strong furry odour, more powerful than agreeable; striving emulously with it—sometimes mastering it, sometimes mastered by it—is the fusty smell of the cloth lining. The old people do not seem to perceive either; old noses have less keen scent, old lungs require less air to feed on, than young ones.

"Trit-trot, trit-trot, trit-trot," goes the old vehicle along the beaten snow of the

broad turnpike-road. As they are jogging a little brisklier than usual down a *very* slight decline, the old gentleman speaks—his strong, shaky old voice loudly audible above the "rumble—rumble—rumble," which, joined to the want of air, is fast making Esther faint and headachy:

"What the deuce does Ruggles mean going at such a pace down these steep hills? Does he think he is to knock my horses' legs all to pieces for his own amusement?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Blessington," answers the old lady, nervously laying hold of the side of the carriage; "it is not at all safe this slippery weather; I'm sure I hope the horses are roughed."

"Miss Craven, tell him to mind what he is about; tell him to go slower—*much* slower," says the old gentleman, in some excitement.

Miss Craven, having with some difficulty lowered the front window, thrusts her head out of it, and, having taken the oppor-

tunity to open mouth and nose and eyes as wide as they will go, to inhale as large a quantity as possible of crisp fresh air, cries: "Ruggles! Ruggles! go slower! *much* slower!"

Ruggles grins, but complies, and subsides into a solemn walk, which continues until they reach Shelford. There smug bareheaded shop-keepers, violet-nosed, scarlet-fingered, standing out in the cold street at the carriage-door, executing with pleased alacrity extensive commissions of half a yard of elastic for Miss Blessington—three ounces of red wool for Mrs. Blessington's knitting—half a dozen blue envelopes for Mr. Blessington. Then, "trit-trot, jig-jog," home again.

Dinner at six: a later hour would be fatal to his digestion, the old gentleman thinks, then, a nice long evening—long as one of those *Veillées du Château*, when Madame la Baronne read aloud some enthralling yet severely moral tale, and Cæsar and Caroline and Pulchérie all sat

entranced, unheeding the flight of time, as ticked away by the château clocks. There is only one small lamp in the whole of the grand old room, and that, in deference to the old man's failing eyes, is hung with so large and deep a green shade, that it is impossible to see to do anything by its light. There is nothing for it but to gape, from seven till ten, at the great battle-pieces hung round the walls — to endeavour to make out, by the aid of the fitful firelight, the singularly clean dead bodies, free apparently from the slightest speck of dust, or stain of blood; at the red-nostriled chargers, snorting away their ebbing lives with all four legs in the air. At ten o'clock, James rung for, to light the candles: then Mrs. Blessington, her air-cushion, work-basket, and Shetland shawl, escorted to her room; two long chapters and several psalms read to her; then a frightened rush along dark passages and draughty galleries to the great distant bedroom—to the rats' multifarious noises;

to the ingenious tunes played by the wind upon the rattling window-frames; to the ginger-curtained bed and many-folded screen; to *possible* sleep, and *certain* terrors—terrors none the less awful for being totally unreasonable.

CHAPTER II.

This first day is a sample of Esther's new life; the other days were like it—not a jot better, not a jot worse. The same thing happened at the same time each day: no two things ever changed places. It was a life that provided all the necessaries of life—that demanded no hard manual labour, no overworking of the brain. The intellectual faculties that it called into play must have been possessed by any moderately intelligent seven-years' child. No one bullies Esther; no one oppresses her; no one troubles their head much about her. So as she performs her monotonous, easy, tiresome little duties towards them, the old people have no sort of objection to her enjoying life, *if she can*. With the

aged, comfort and happiness are interchangeable terms: continuous warmth of body, pleasant-tasted meats, a profound stagnant quiet around their armchairs, much sleep—these are their *summum bonum*. They have had love, and have outlived it—excitement also, and grief: they have outlived all but the elemental instincts that refuse to be outlived. Looking back from the vantage-ground of dotage on the fought battle of life, they wonder that any one can long to be in the thick of it. In this life of Esther's there are no hardships to be borne—none of those sufferings, the enduring of which with self-conscious complacent heroism almost compensates them. It has none of the elements of tragedy: there is nothing very noble in bearing with respectable patience the trifling annoyance of making yourself hoarse roaring the price of wheat, and the pros and cons of disendowment, into an old man's ear; there is nothing grand in picking up the countless dropped stitches in an old wo-

man's knitting. In it there is nothing to endure, nothing to enjoy; it is essentially negative, flat, stale, sterile. It would be all very well if any end were to be seen to it; if it were not a sort of small Eternity in life; if there were to be distant holidays to be looked forward to, when the few saved pounds might be poured, with the joyful generosity of the very poor, into some stricken parent's lap—might go to buy boots and shoes for needy little brothers and sisters. But

> "Fatherly, motherly, sisterly, brotherly
> Home she has none."

All her life seems crowded into the seventeen years behind her; there seems to be nothing left to happen in the fifty or sixty years ahead. She has nothing to look forward to but huge cycles of newspaper-reading, footstool-carrying, message-running; of lending all her useful organs of sight and hearing and touch to others; of

keeping for herself only her suffering, aching, empty heart!

"Every succeeding year will steal something away from her beauty."

People pity her now, because she is so young and pretty—not reflecting that the possession of the two best gifts under heaven makes her so much the less worthy a subject for compassion. Twenty years hence, she will probably be a "companion" still—will be not near so young, not near so touching, and infinitely more to be pitied.

The snow lies long—longer than it generally does at this time of year. Ordinarily the old Cheshire saying holds good:

"If there's ice in October as 'll hould a duck,
All the rest of the winter 'll turn to muck!"

But this October there has been ice enough to hold many ducks; but yet the rest of the winter shows no signs of, as the homely saw phrases it, "turning to muck." In the little flower-garden, round three sides of which the ivied buttressed house is built, only a white heap here, and a white depression

there, show where bush or bed were wont to be. Over the fair wide park, with all its mimic hills and valleys, copses and spinneys, God has laid a great sheet—great as the one that was let down by its four corners on the housetop to the fastidious Apostle—a sheet purely, crisply, miserably white. In the park Esther, in the early gloaming, after the daily drive, so literally a promenade *en voiture*, takes long walks; ruins her boots, discolours her petticoats, and makes her crape crimp with snow-water: strolls listless and alone under the old bare trees that have stripped off all their clothing—now at the very time that they seem to need them most; traces the slender footprints of the famished birds—the little delicate tracks crossing and recrossing one another. And always the leading thought—displaced now and then by lesser thoughts, that flit like travelling swallows through her mind, but ever, ever returning—is, "Where is Jack? Where has my boy gone to? Where is he *now*, *at*

this moment?" If some trusty messenger could but come to her, with sure tidings, saying, "It is well with him!" Has she any reason for believing him to be in heaven, beyond the vague confidence that most people seem to feel that their relatives must be there, on the principle, I suppose, of the French Duke, of whom his kindred remarked, that "God would certainly think twice 'avant de damner une personne de sa qualité!'"

Jack's death had been most unlike the deaths of the shining Evangelical lights in Bessy Brandon's books, whose whole lives had been but trifling prologues to the jubilant drama of their death. Death had been to them an ecstacy; they had died with words of confident rapture on their lips—with strains of welcoming music in their ears: he had departed painfully, sadly, almost dumbly; no sound of triumphant clarions greeted him from beyond Death's deep ford. Is he, then, in *hell?* Oh blessed doctrine of cleansing

purgatorial pains! if our faith would but admit of you! Which of us does not seem to himself so much too bad for heaven, so much too good for hell?

"Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years,
A hundred thousand, and at the last be saved!"

Where is he, then?—where is he? She takes counsel of the mute forces of nature—of the clouds, the snows, and the blasts. But of what use? They knew not of his story; or, if they did, they were forbidden to tell of it; silence was laid like a seal upon their lips.

It is not in the most edifying books that the grandest sayings are to be found. What can be nobler than this of Rousseau's dying Julie: "Qui s'endort dans le sein d'un père, n'est pas en souci du réveil?"

The wearier in body she can return from these long sad rambles, the better pleased is Esther; for is not weariness the father of sleep—sleep, the one impartial thing under heaven; sleep, the radical; sleep,

the leveller, that leaves a king's arms to embrace a tinker? But of what use is it to sleep, if in sleep one hear—

> "False voices, feel the kisses of false mouths,
> And footless sound of perished feet?"

And worse even than such dream-tortured slumber is fear-tortured waking. Constitutionally timid, a weakened body and broken spirit have made Esther pitiably nervous. Jealousy, remorse, and fear run a dreary race for the palm of extremest suffering; and I am not sure that fear does not win. The poor child suffers the torments of the damned in her huge hearse-bed in the far-off, rat-haunted, ghostly old chamber. She dreads falling asleep, for fear of waking to find the low fire playing antics with Burke's long nose and spectacles, with Pitt's maypole figure on the screen; flickering over the malignant fleshy Cupids on the wall; waking to see, looking in upon her through the curtains, Jack's face—not kind, *débonnaire*, smiling,

as she used to see it in the study at home (for *that* could frighten no one), but solemn, stiff, with closed eyes and bandaged chin, as she had last seen it. Sometimes she sits up in bed, a cold sweat standing on her brow, as some noise, distincter than usual, sounds through the room; "thud, thud," as of some falling object; an unexplained rustling in the passage; a little clicking in the door-lock—sits up, listening with strained ears, thinking, "Can *that* be rats?" Momently she expects to see some crape-masked burglar enter the door or window. And if such burglar did enter, it would be useless to scream for help; she is too far off from the rest of the household to be heard: it would be of no use to ring the bell, for it rings downstairs, miles away, and everybody is in bed and asleep upstairs. So she lies quaking—her terror now and then rising to such an uncontrollable pitch that she feels as though, if it lasted a moment longer, she must go mad: listening with intense impatience to the

leisurely "Tick-tack, tick-tack, tick-tack" of the cuckoo-clock outside; listening with inexpressible longing to hear it say, "Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo!" four times. At four o'clock she will be safe, she thinks; at four o'clock cocks begin to crow, dairymaids to get up, the bodiless dead return to their churchyard homes, night's unutterable horror to pass. What wonder if, after the agony of such vigils—agony causeless, you will say, unreasonable, but none the less real, none the less acute for that—she comes down in the morning wan, nerveless, with haggard cheeks, and great dark streaks under the unrested beauty of her eyes?

"The time is near the birth of Christ."

"Stir-up-Sunday" is past; people have bought their raisins and suet and citron, and begun to mix their Christmas puddings. Turkeys lie dead, thick as autumn-leaves in Vallambrosa. The snow is gone, but not without leaving Miss Craven the

legacy of a very bad cold, derived from countless soaked stockings and neglected wet petticoats. She has had it a fortnight, and her weakened lowered frame seems incapable of shaking off the trifling ailment. For a week her voice has been almost gone, and she has consumed many sticks of liquorice, many boxes of black-currant lozenges, in the endeavour to bring it back to the requisite shouting pitch for the inevitable daily newspaper reading.

It is afternoon: heavy rain, following the thaw, has prevented the invariable drive to Shelford. Mrs. Blessington and the two girls are sitting in the great room hung with battle-pieces, which is old-fashionedly named "the saloon." It is a mercy that it is a great room—else the fire, piled halfway up the chimney, and the never-opened windows would render it unendurably close. As it is, the atmosphere, though less stifling than that of the interior of the family-coach, is fustier than is altogether agreeable.

"My dear," says Mrs. Blessington, shivering, "pick up my shawl; I really must have sandbags to those windows; there comes in a wind at them that positively nearly blows one out of one's chair."

Esther complies, and then resumes her occupation of holding a skein of wool for Miss Blessington to wind. As often as she can do so without positive rudeness, she takes long looks at her companion's face—immovably polished, like a monumental angel's: looks at her, half out of that sheer love of beauty in any form, from a man's to a beetle's, which is innate in some sensuous natures; partly, and much more, because each frosty-fair feature of her face, each trinket almost upon her person, is linked indissolubly in her mind with some look or word of St. John. Association, they say, lies stronger in a smell than in aught else—stronger than in anything seen or heard; and so now the slight subtle scent floating from Constance's perfumed hair recalls to the

sad young "companion," with a thrust of sharpest pain, her one day's betrothal; that one day for whose sweet sake she does not regret having endured the calamity of existence; that day when they sowed—

> . Their talk with little kisses, thick
> As roses in rose harvest."

It is odd how often, when one is musing dumbly on some unspoken name, the people in whose company one is give utterance to that name, without any former conversation having led up to it.

"My dear Constance," says Mrs. Blessington, her slow old thoughts having at length travelled from draughts and sandbags, "do you think St. John has any fancy as to what room he has? Young men are sometimes *faddy*. I depend upon you to tell me, and I will give Franklin orders about it."

St. John's room! He is coming here, then! The wool that she is holding drops

forgotten into Esther's lap; the old delicious carmine that used to make her so like a dog-rose springs up suddenly lovely into her face. Love is as hard to kill as any snake:

"Now, at the last gasp of love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, passion speechless lies;
When faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And innocence is closing up his eyes:
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over
From death to life, thou mightst him yet recover."

"Unless you hold the skein differently, Miss Craven, I'm afraid I really cannot wind it," says Constance, a slight shade of contemptuous displeasure in her voice.

Esther jumps back to reality, to find Miss Blessington's icy unescapable eyes riveted upon her. She cannot turn away her head, nor dive under the table for an imaginary lost handkerchief; she cannot lift her hands to hide her face; her occupation, which keeps both ruthlessly employed, forbids it. She can only sit still, plainly crimson, and be stared at.

"Thanks, very much, aunt," Constance says, in her ladylike piano voice, beginning again to turn the scarlet ball swiftly through her long pale fingers; "but I don't think he has any fancies. I could not think of letting you spoil him by supposing he has; I'm sure he will be very happy, wherever you put him."

"The blue room in the west gallery is one of the warmest in the house," rejoins the old lady, gathering her wraps closelier about her: "it is next but two to Miss Craven's; it has the same aspect. Yours is warm—isn't it, my dear?—and there is a bath-room opening out of it."

"Is Mr. Gerard coming here?" asks Esther, tremulously, resolute to show Miss Blessington that she *can* mention his name.

"Yes, my dear—to-morrow. Do you know him? Oh no! of course you cannot," replies the old lady, looking a little inquisitively at the tender rose-face of the girl.

"Miss Craven met him at Felton last autumn," Constance answers for her—no faintest gust of feeling apparently agitating the even indifference of her voice. "He was most good-natured to her; riding and walking, and altogether making a martyr of himself. St. John makes himself very useful, flirting with all the young ladies that come to the house: he really is invaluable in that way!"

Esther stoops her head low down, choked with indignation. "Perhaps I don't come under the head of a 'young lady,'" she says, almost in a whisper; "but he certainly did not flirt with me."

"Didn't he?" Constance replies, carelessly. "Oh, if I recollect right, he amused himself a little—he always does. I often take him to task about that manner of his; it might give rise to unlucky mistakes; people who don't know him don't understand it."

Esther bites her lips, but has the sense

to allow, with vast difficulty, this last observation to pass unquestioned.

"His horses have arrived already," continues Constance, placidly; "he has actually been unconscionable enough to send four of them: he is evidently going to test uncle's and your patience to the utmost by making a perfect visitation."

"Felton is such a good hunting country, that I wonder Mr. Gerard can bear to leave it now, just as the frost has broken up," remarks Esther, almost composedly; a dim exquisite hope flashing up in her mind that he has heard of her being at Blessington, and is coming to ask her to forgive him—to forgive her rather; to ask her to kiss and make friends.

The story-book ending, "Lived happy ever after," is running through her brain, when her reverie is broken, gently but very effectually, as reveries are apt to be, by a simple speech of Miss Blessington's, spoken with a little smile:

"It is evident that Miss Craven has not heard our news, is not it, aunt?"

"What news?" inquires the girl, eagerly.

"Nothing of much interest to any one but ourselves, I suppose. It is only" (speaking with slow triumph, and narrowly watching the effect of her words) "that St. John and I have made up our minds to marry one another!"

The knife cuts as clean and clear as she could have wished; the divine happy rose-flush slips away suddenly out of the poor blank face opposite her; a grey ashy-white takes its place. She had thought that pain and pleasure were buried with Jack on the slope of Glan-yr-Afon's mountain graveyard; but that moment of raging agony undeceives her. For an instant the table and chairs seem dancing round; a humming buzz sounds dully in her ears; then the faintness passes; the table and chairs stand still again; the buzz ceases; and she is sitting on an old gilt chair: her arms still moving mechanically, with the

outstretched wool upon them, while Constance goes winding, winding on—winding away hope and pleasure and joy; while the ball, growing larger under her hands, seems to have stolen its red colour from Esther's heart-blood.

"Our friends have really been very disagreeable to us about it," says Miss Blessington, with a subdued laugh; "they tell us that it is the most uninteresting marriage they ever heard of, for that they had all foretold it, heaven knows how many centuries ago!"

"It is very seldom," replies Mrs. Blessington, shaking her head slowly to and fro, "that a young man shows the sense St. John Gerard has done in coming into his parents' views for him: in the present day they are mostly so headstrong and resolute to pick and choose for themselves, which generally ends in their selecting some worthless person utterly unsuited to their rank and fortune."

"How long have you been engaged?"

asks Esther, presently, framing her words with as much difficulty as though they had been spoken in some little-known foreign tongue. Worse to her than the loss of St. John is the consciousness that that loss is written in despair's grey colours on her faded face, right under her rival's victorious eyes.

"How long? I really forget," answers Constance, with affected carelessness. "Oh, no! By-the-by, I recollect; it was almost immediately after you left Felton. I daresay" (with a smile) "that you were among the ranks of the prophets; lookers-on proverbially see most of the game."

"Indeed—no!" cries the girl, with a passionate disclaimer, the agony of loss made sharper by the humiliation of defeat. "Nothing ever struck me as more unlikely!"

"Indeed! And why, may I ask?"

The skein is finished; Esther lifts one hand to her face, and feels a slight relief in the partial shade.

"Why, pray?" with a slightly sharpened accent.

"Because—because," she answers, in confusion, "you had been brought up together from children; because Mr Gerard's manner seemed so much more like a brother's than a—a—lover's."

The word so applied half chokes her.

"We dislike public demonstrations of affection, both of us," rejoins the other, coldly displeased; "we leave those to servants and *savages*."

A footman enters with tea in handleless red dragon cups, costly as age, brittleness, and ingenious ugliness can make them.

Esther leans back in her chair, idle, staring vacantly at the pane, blurred with big rain-drops.

After a pause, "You have not congratulated me, Miss Craven," Constance says, sipping her tea delicately; her madonna smile relaxing the severely correct lines of her Greek mouth.

Esther gives a great start. "I? Oh,

I beg your pardon! I—I forgot; I—I—I congratulate you!"

"I was just going to write and tell you the news," says Constance, graciously—

—"I thought it might interest you, as you had been with us so lately, and seen the whole thing going on—when we heard of your brother's sudden death."

Esther rises abruptly, and walks to the window, with that painful hatred in her heart towards Miss Blessington that we feel towards those who lightly name our sacred dead to us.

"Was he your *only* brother, my dear?" inquires Mrs. Blessington, with languid interest.

"Yes."

"Dear—dear! Very sad—very sad! And what did he die of? Consumption?"

"No—diphtheria."

"Ah! A very fatal complaint, my dear, especially among children. I have always had a great horror of it. In my younger days it used to be called sore throat, but

I suppose it killed just as many people then as it does now that it has got a fine long Latin name. I suppose your poor brother suffered a great deal—didn't he, love?"

No answer, except a stifled sob, a rush from the room, and the sound of flying feet upon the hall's stone floor.

There are some things past human endurance; and to hear Jack's parting agonies—agonies whose memory she herself dare as yet hardly contemplate in her heart's low depths—lightly discussed by a gossiping old woman, is one of those things.

CHAPTER III.

"GET me some fresh candles — long ones; longer than these—as long as you possibly can," Esther says that same evening, on going to bed, to the housemaid whom she finds putting coals on her fire.

"I think, 'm, that you will find that these will last for to-night," the woman answers, looking at the very respectable dimensions of the unlit candles on Esther's queer old-fashioned toilet-table.

"No—no, they won't!" she answers, nervously; "it is better to be on the safe side."

"Would you like a night-light, miss?"

"Oh no, no! they make the corners of the room blacker than ever, and they cast

such odd shadows. I'm *so* afraid of the dark," she ends, shuddering.

"I'm afraid you don't sleep well, 'm?"

"Not very. By-the-by" (with a sudden inspiration), "have you got anything that you could give me to make me sleep—any opiate of any kind?"

"I've got a little laudanum, ma'am, that Mrs. Franklin give me last week when I had a bad face."

"Fetch it me," she cries, eagerly; "that is, if you don't want it yourself. It is very foolish of me," she says, looking rather ashamed, "but I cannot sleep for fright."

The servant goes, and presently returns with a small dark blue bottle.

"About how much ought one to take, I wonder?" Esther says, holding it up between herself and the firelight.

"If you have never been used to take it before, I should think two or three drops would be *hample*, 'm; I hope, 'm" (with a little anxiety in her florid plebeian

face), "as you'll be careful not to take a *h*overdose, or you might chance never to wake up again: I knew a young person as took it by mistake for 'black dose'—it was the fault of the chemist's young man—and in an hour she was a corpse; they said as she had took enough to kill ten men."

"It is no wonder that she was a corpse, then," Miss Craven answers, with a slight smile. "I should not think" (scrutinising the little bottle inquisitively), "that there was enough here to kill one woman, let alone ten men. Yes, I'll be careful; thanks, very much. Good night!" (with her pretty courteous smile).

The housemaid being gone, Esther bolts the door—a weakly defensive measure against one class of assailants, the crape-masked burglars; though, as she is aware, utterly impotent against the other and worse class—the intangible, unkeep-out-able *revenants;* the rustlers along the passage, the rattlers of the lock. She

then seats herself at the dressing-table, flings down her arms among her brushes and combs, and sinks her head upon them, in closest proximity to the candles, whose little spires of flame the wind, thrusting its thin body in between window and frame, drives right against the tumbled plenty of her hair. In this attitude she remains a long time; forgetting even to search under the bed, up the chimney, behind the screen, or in the huge japanned chest, upon which a disconnected but interesting landscape of cocks, pagodas, and junks picks itself out, in tarnished yellow, from the dull black ground.

It is impossible for the most comprehensive mind or body to contain any two distinct, even though not necessarily opposite feelings, in their fullest force, at the same time. If one is famished with hunger, one cannot be consumed by thirst; if one is consumed by thirst, one cannot be famished with hunger. If one is in despair at being forgotten by one's

lover, one is indifferent as to the onset of any number of ghosts and murderers; if one is paralysed by fear of ghosts and murderers, one is tolerably indifferent as to one's lover's lapse of memory. For the first time since his death, Jack is not the leading thought in Esther's mind. Poor dead! How can they be so unreasonable as to expect to be anyone's leading thought? Even we noisy, voiceful, visible living are obliged to keep crying out, "I am here—remember me," in order not to sink into oblivion amongst our neighbours and kinsfolk.

> "Wilt thou remember me when I am gone,
> Further each day from thy vision withdrawn—
> Thou in the sunset, and I in the dawn?"

Pretty, tender, touching lines; but I think that the answer to them, if given truly, would hardly content the asker: "I will remember thee for a very little while; even till I see some one younger and prettier than thou wert, and then I will forget thee!"

Miss Craven starts up, after awhile, and begins to walk up and down, over the creaky up-and-downy boards, and to speak vehemently and out loud to the rats, who, numerous and cheerful as usual, are scrabbling, pattering, squeaking under the floor, behind the wainscot, in the japan-chest. "At all events," she says, with a sort of savage satisfaction, "there is one comfort: he'll be miserable—he'll curse the day when he ties himself to that lump of blancmange. Blancmange! white meat! that exactly expresses her; she looks as if she would be good to eat—soft, luscious, ripe. Unfortunately, a man does not contemplate *eating* his wife!"

But even this little angry gleam of comfort has but a short life. Soon, too soon, it occurs to her that men do not look at a woman with women's eyes. Men, being three parts animal themselves, condone any offence to a woman the animal part of whom is perfect and beautiful. How else is it that beauty — mere blank beauty,

although destitute of any accessory charms —can always command its price in the market, and that price a high one? In marrying Constance, St. John will have no disappointments to undergo, no discoveries to make. He has known her all her life; has seen her change from a handsome stupid child into a handsomer stupider girl, and bloom, lastly, into a handsomest, stupidest woman. Constance has no antecedents; she is a woman without a history. That also is in her favour. A man likes to write his name on a sheet of white paper better than on one upon which many other men have written theirs. Perfectly virtuous, perfectly healthy, perfectly beautiful, young, rich, not ill-tempered, not fast, not shrew-tongued—surely she is a prize worth any man's drawing. If, in addition to her long list of qualifications, she possessed also Desdemona's heart and Imogen's mind, it would be too hard upon the rest of womankind:

"Why should one woman have all goodly things?"

Want of sympathy with the companion of her life makes a woman embittered, reckless—sends her often trespassing on her neighbours' preserves, in the endeavour to find there that congeniality of spirit which is not to be met with in her own. Want of sympathy with the companion of *his* life sends a man oftener to his club; makes him much pleasanter to other women when he goes into society; makes him sulky and sleepy when he dines at home—that is all. Doubtless St. John will be indifferent to his bride at first; he will dislocate his jaw with yawning during their wedding-tour, but she will bear him children; "selon les us et coutumes Anglaises, elle aura beaucoup d'enfants;" he will like her for that. Year by year they will come here to Blessington, probably. Year by year she (Esther) will see the blossom of a fuller contentment on his wide brow, the quiet of a deeper rest in

his restless eyes. And she herself will be here always, for one cannot throw away one's daily bread. Year by year they will find her with ever thinner hair, sharper shoulders, drabber cheeks; and he, looking upon her with the forgiveness of complete indifference, will say to himself, "She is bad, and she is ugly; I was well rid of her!" Than to be so forgiven, how much rather would she have been struck down dead by his hand, lifted in righteous anger and vengeance, on that moonlit September night, beside the glassy rush-brimmed mere at Felton! A sudden rage at her own fatuity fills her, when she looks back on that idiotic hope that had upsprung in her mind, that his object in coming to Blessington was to pardon her, and take her back to himself. Do men ever pardon a sin against themselves?

". . . . . Worse than despair,
Worse than the bitterness of death, is hope.
It is the only ill which can find place
Upon the giddy, sharp, and narrow hour

Tottering beneath us. Plead with the swift frost,
That it should spare the eldest flower of spring;
Plead with awakening earthquake, o'er whose couch
Even now a city stands, strong, fair and free,
Now stench and blackness yawns like death. Oh! plead
With famine and wind-walking pestilence,
Blind lightning, or the deep sea; not with man—
Cruel, cold formal man—righteous in words,
In deeds a Cain."

She sits down before her looking-glass, and stares desperately, with inner eyes, at the blank ruin of her life; with outer eyes at the ruin mirrored in her sunken altered face, that the old looking-glass, blurred with rust-stains, makes look more sunken and altered still. Involuntarily she lifts her thumb and forefinger, and lays them in the hollows of her cheek, as if seeking for the red carnations that used to flower so fairly there. She has noticed before the decay of her beauty—noticed it with apathy, as who should say, "Everything else is gone, why should not this go too?" But now she observes it with a sick pang, as at the parting with a friend: she would

give ten years of her life to reach it back again. "It was only for my beauty he liked me," she says, still speaking aloud; "it was only for my beauty that anybody could like me; there is nothing else to like in me. I never was clever, or said witty things, or sang, or played: I was only pretty. Now that that is gone, everything is gone!"

As one shipwrecked, floating about on a plank among the weltering waves of some great plunging, grey-green sea, strains his eyes along the horizon to see some sail-speck, some misty palm-island, that looks as though it were hung midway in air; so she strains her mental eyes to catch sight of some friendly ship that may take her off from this rock of her despair. This world is full of pairs, but some oversight has left a good many odd ones also; Esther is an odd one. Her road has come to a blank wall, and there stopped. Is there no ladder that can overclimb this

wall?—no gap in all the thickness of its brick-and-mortar?—no outlet?

She rises and stands by the fire; her eyes down-dropped on the blue-and-white Dutch tiles—on the hobs, and queer brass-inlaid dogs: involuntarily she raises them, and they rest upon the little laudanum-bottle on the chimneypiece. Quick as lightning, an answer to her thought-question seems flashed across her mind. There is a ladder that can overclimb *any* wall; there is a gap that can give egress through the stoutest masonries; there is an outlet from the deepest dungeon: and this ladder, this gap, this outlet, men call *Death.* Over the sea of her memory the housemaid's words float back: "I hope you'll be careful not to take an overdose, 'm, or you might chance never to wake again!" They had been spoken in careful warning; to her they seemed words of persuasive promise. Never to wake again! Never to say again in the evening, "Would God

it were morning!" and in the morning, "Would God it were evening!"

To Esther, the great sting of death had always laid in his pain—in his gasping breath, twitched features, writhen unfleshed limbs; but this death that comes in sleep can be no bitterer than a mother that lifts her little slumbering child out of his small bed (he not knowing), and bears him away softly. The idea of self-slaughter, when first suggested, has always something terrific, especially to us, who from our birth have been taught to look upon it as a crime hardly second to murder; to us, to whom Cato's great heroism and Lucretia's chaste martyrdom seem as sins. Some vague idea that suicide is forbidden in the Scriptures runs through Esther's mind. She sits down at the table, and, drawing a Bible towards her, searches long among the partial, temporary, and local prohibitions and commands of the Books of the Law, and still longer among the universal, all-applying

prohibitions and commands of Gospel and Epistle. Whether it be that she search ill, or that there is nought therein written on the subject she seeks, she knows not; only she finds nothing; and, closing the book, she leans her pale cheek on her closed white hand. Her brain feels strangely calm, and she even forgets the darkness of the night, musing on a deeper darkness.

What is this death, that we write in such great black letters? After all, what is it that we know about him, for or against? Is it fair to condemn him unheard, unknown? Why should we give him any embodiment?—why should we personify him at all? He is but an ending: What is there in the end of anything more terrifying than in its beginning, or its middle? Death is but the end of life, as birth is its beginning, and as some unnoticed moment in its course is its middle.

Why are the waters in which we set our feet at the last more coldly awful than

those out of which we stepped at the first? Both—both, are they not portions of the great sea of Eternity that floweth ever round Time's little island? A clock is wound up for a certain number of hours; when that number of hours has elapsed, it stops. Our more complicated machinery is wound up to go for a certain number of years, months, days; when that number of years, months, and days is elapsed, we stop—that is all. What is this life, about the taking or keeping of which we make such a clamour, as if it were some great, costly, goodly thing?

> "It is but a watch or a vision
> Between a sleep and a sleep."

It is cowardly, disloyal, say they, for a soldier to desert the post at which he has been set. Ay, but the galley-slave, chained to an oar, if he can but break his chain and be gone, may flee away, and none blame him. A prisoner that is not on parole, what shall hinder him from

escaping? If he can but burst his bars, and draw his strong bolts, may he not out and away into the free air? If, before our birth, in that unknown pre-existence of ours at which backward-reaching memory catches not, we, standing looking into life, had said, "Oh, Master, give me of this life! I know not what it is, but I would fain taste it; and if Thou givest it to me, I swear to Thee to keep and guard it carefully, as long as I may——." But have we ever so asked for it? Has it not been thrust upon us, undesiring, unconsulted, as a gift that is neither of beauty nor of price? Who can chide us, if, laying it down meekly at the everlasting feet, we say, "Oh, Great Builder! take back that house in which, a reluctant tenant, Thou hast placed me. Resume Thy gift; it is a burden too heavy for me! Lay it, I pray Thee, on shoulders that mayhap may bear it stoutlier!"

She lifts the bottle, having uncorked it, to her lips and tastes. It has a deathly,

sickly flavour, not enticing. Hesitating, she holds it in her hand, half-frightened, half-allured; while her heart beats loud and hard. "It is the key to all my doubts," she says within herself, looking steadfastly at it: "it is the answer to all my questions. If I do but drink this little draught, I shall have all knowledge; I shall never wonder again! I shall know where Jack is; I shall be with him! But shall I?" Ay, that's the rub! Even in this small world, to be alive at the same time with another person is not necessarily, or even probably, to be *with* him. Wide continents, high mountains, deep rivers often sever those that are closest of kin; and in the world of the dead, which, being so much more populous, must be so much the greater, is it not likely that still wider continents, higher mountains, deeper rivers, may part two that would fain be together? What if, before her time, she incur the abasement of death, the dishonour of corruption, and yet attain not

the object for whose sake she is willing desperately to lay her comely head in the dust?

She changes her attitude, puts down the bottle, and again stoops her small flower-face on her bent fingers — her thoughts varying their channel a little: "If I go, I shall leave no gap behind me, any more than a teacupful of water taken out of a great pool leaves a gap behind. If it is disgraceful to go willingly out of the world, instead of being dragged unwillingly out of it, my disgrace is my own. I involve no one else in it; there is no one of my name left to be ashamed of me. I leave no work undone in the world. Hundreds of others can carry air-cushions, and read to a deaf old man far more patiently than I have done. My fifty pounds a year will go to put daily bread into some other poor woman's mouth, to whom it may perhaps taste sweeter than it has done to me." Her head sinks forward again on her outstretched arms

. . . . "It is awful to go out into the dark all by oneself," she thinks, with a pang of intense self-pity, as she feels the warm gentle life throbbing in her round tender limbs: "and I, that hate the dark so——, is it very wicked of me to think of this thing? People will say so, but I will not hear them. Where shall I be to-morrow at even?"

"You will be at Blessington, and feeling a good deal ashamed of your absurd paroxysm of cowardly despair," answers plain common sense, who, in the shape of an untold multitude of rats, begins rushing and gnawing, hundred-toothed, scampering hundred-footed behind the walls.

Esther lifts her foolish prone head, and listens. "Skurry—skurry!" go the rats; "Crack!" go the beams; "Thud!" goes some unexplained bulk, in the dining-room underneath! As the tide, at flood, creeps up and over the sands, so the child's old fears creep up and over her new mad scheme of suicide. "Rustle—rustle!"

come the ghostly dresses along the China gallery; "Click, rattle,—rattle, click!" goes the door-lock. Down goes the laudanum-bottle on the table, and Esther, springing to her feet, begins to unfasten, with fingers rendered nervous by extreme haste, her dress and the belt round her slim waist. "Crack—crack—crack!" goes something close to the bed-head; "Bang!" goes a distant door. There is no wind; what or who can have executed that bang? The fire, which has been burning hollow for some time, collapses, and falls in suddenly with a clear loud noise. In one leap Miss Craven is in bed and beneath the sheltering bedclothes.

All very well pensively to contemplate, in half-earnest, the conveying oneself out of a world that has been a most harsh stepmother to one, but by no means well to have one's graceful farewells to existence broken in upon by a nation tailed and whiskered—by the spirits of old reprobates in flowered dressing-gowns, and of ladies,

who nightly carry their patched and powdered heads like parcels under their arms.

Good night, wicked woman! May the rats career all night over your small face, as a punishment for your great idiocy!

CHAPTER IV.

St. John has arrived; he has jumped down from the dog-cart that brought him from the station, wrapped up in a huge greatcoat lined with otter-skin, that makes him look like "three single gentlemen rolled into one." His nose, always rather a salient point in his face, is reddened by the east winds, and his eyelids purple with want of sleep, as he has been travelling night and day—not from any violent hurry to reach his destination, but because boats and mail-trains suited—from the South of Ireland, where for the last ten days he has been daily shooting the wily woodcock, and nightly putting into practice the excellent resolution expressed in the song of "not going home till morning," with

some rather fast bachelor-friends, who, like himself, are as yet destitute of household angels, to bring heaven to their hearths, to take away their cues, blow out their cigars, and reduce the number of their brandies and sodas. Neither a good-looking nor a good-tempered young man does he look as he makes his descent. The first he cannot help—the second he can. His ill-humour is owing partly to a violent headache; partly to the information, just imparted to him by the butler, that "the family dines at six o'clock now *reg'lar*—no difference made whatever company there may be—on account of the old squire's 'ealth."

Perhaps, had St. John known that a woman was watching his arrival, he might have endeavoured to smooth his features into an expression of greater amiability. Had he known that that woman was Esther Craven, the look of bored annoyance would certainly have given way to a stronger one, whether of pleasure or pain.

Crouched on one of the paintless window-seats in the China gallery, she watches his coming, as she had watched his going; only that now she makes no smallest effort to attract his attention — cowers away rather in the dark, while he stands, unconscious and grumbling, in the patch of red light that comes through the open hall-door. He has been here half an hour now —half an hour spent in the hot airtight saloon, where the giant fire draws a strong woolly smell from Miss Blessington's winter dress, as she sits right into the fire—a practice not permitted by the autocrat of Felton, and consequently largely indulged in by his subjects when away from his master-eye.

The old squire has requested St. John to come round to his other side—to draw his chair closer to his—to speak more distinctly. The old lady has explained to him the exact manner in which the draught comes through the middle window, and catches her just at the back

of the neck, so that when she wakes in the morning it is so stiff that she can hardly turn it a quarter of an inch one way or another. Miss Blessington has expressed one fear that he had had a cold journey down, and another that he had not been able to get a foot-warmer at Shoreditch; there were always so shamefully few there, particularly these afternoon trains, that all the business-men came down from their offices by. Constance had certainly never spoken a truer word, than in saying that she and her lover were not fond of public demonstrations; the question that their acquaintance asked each other was, whether they were any fonder of private ones?

As the clock strikes half-past five, Miss Blessington rises and floats away lightly, and without noise, to dress. Not for a kingdom would she rob one second from the sacred half-hour—all too short already—though the toilette to be made is only for the benefit of two purblind old people, who cannot see it, and of a young man who

does not know gingham from "gaze de Chambéry," and who has seen her in short frock and trousers, in long dress and chignon, in court-dress, in ball-dress, in walking-dress, in driving-dress, in staying-at-home dress, any thousand number of times during the last seventeen years.

Momently the hot close atmosphere is making Gerard's headache worse; momently the prospect of the six-o'clock dinner becomes more intolerable to him. Heroically, however, he enters into conversation with his great aunt-in-law elect.

"So you have been trying an experiment, I hear," he says, scratching the cat's ear and cheek and chin as she successively lifts them to him for titillation,—"set up a 'companion,' haven't you? Do you find it work well?"

"You must ask grandpapa," replies the old lady, looking towards her husband, who, with head sunk on chest, lips protruded, and eyes closed, seems at the present moment hardly in a condition to

be put through a catechism on any subject; "he has more to say to her than I have. You see it was too great a strain on dear Constance's strength reading to him every day, and he dislikes Gurney's reading" (Gurney is the valet): "he says he never minds his stops, and *bawls* at him; and so we thought it better to get a person of more education, who would be always on the spot, and——"

"And whose strength," interrupts St. John, a little ironically, "unlike Constance's, would be warranted *un-overworkable?*"

"Exactly," answers the old lady, innocently.

"And she is a satisfactory beast of burden, I hope?" says Gerard, yawning till the tears come into his eyes: "fetches and carries well?"

"She seems a nice, quiet, ladylike person enough," replies Mrs. Blessington, leaning back placidly in her chair, with her hands, in black kid half-gloves, lying

folded in her lap—"only, unfortunately, over-sensitive: those sort of people always are. Why, it was only yesterday that she rushed from this room with such violence that she nearly shook Constance and me out of our chairs, because I made some slight observation about a brother of hers who died lately, and to whom, it seems, she was much attached. I'm sure I had no intention of hurting her feelings, poor girl!"

"Girl!" repeats St. John, laughing; "that means a gushing thing of fifty, I suppose?"

"More like fifteen. By-the-by, she said something the other day about having known *you*."

"Known me!" cries the young man, opening his quick grey eyes. "Well, 'more know Tom Fool than Tom Fool knows.' I never knew any one in my life that had a 'companion'—of this sort, I mean. What may my unknown friend's name be?"

But at this juncture, before the name of his unknown friend can be confided to him, the old squire, waking up, urgently requests to be told what they are talking about, which information is communicated, in a succession of long dull roars, into his good ear. St. John takes advantage of the diversion to leave the room, and, running upstairs, knocks at Constance's door.

"Constance!"

"Who's there?" (Voice rather muffled —from under an avalanche of hair apparently).

"I. Can you come out and speak to me for a minute, if you are not in too great deshabille?"

"Certainly."

Ordinarily, Miss Blessington is a prude; but to appear for an instant before her betrothed in light-blue cashmere lined with blue satin, and her hair in golden rain about her shoulders, is, she thinks, for once permissible. Has he come to make

some demonstration of affection?—to give her some warmer greeting than the nonchalant handshake with which they met? Or has he, has he—oh sweeter, warmer thought!—brought her a present from Ireland? Visions of Irish poplin, Irish lace, bog-oak and gold, cunningly fashioned together into bracelet or necklace, float before her mind's eye. In a moment, with a little affected coyness on her face, she stands before him; stands before him—and he does not even see her! He has opened one of the rusty casements in the passage, and thrust his head out, feeling the keen eastern blast blow against his throbbing brow with a sense of relief. He has evidently no gift in his hand, nor does he seem to be assailed by any very overpowering temptation to embrace her, blue and gold and white miracle though she be. Hearing her he turns, and the expression of his countenance is glum.

"I say, does this sort of thing happen every day?"

"What sort of thing?" (with a little pique at the errand on which she has been called away from among her cosmetics).

"This feeding—I cannot call it dining—like savages, at midday?"

"It is a fancy of my uncle," replies Constance, with the door-handle still in her hand; "he imagines that, if he dined later, he should not have time to digest his food before going to bed."

St. John utters an impatient exclamation. "In Heaven's name let him digest in bed then, or, if not, let him dine by himself! I'm sure no one would object to that arrangement. Poor old boy! he can't help it; but it does take away one's appetite to see a very old man mumbling his food, like a toothless old dog over a bone."

"I suppose he may dine at what hour he chooses in his own house?" says Constance, coldly.

"Of course he may. He may go back to the manners and customs of the ancient

British," rejoins Gerard, impatiently; "he may get up in the middle of the night and paint himself in blue-and-white stripes, instead of wearing coat and waistcoat, if he chooses—only he can hardly expect civilised beings to join him."

"I always think it right, on principle, to humour old people's whims," answers Constance, taking the high moral tone that she has adopted more than once since their engagement in any discussion with her lover—a tone symptomatic of what the postnuptial line of attack is likely to be.

"A very excellent sentiment, my dear," says St. John, a little mockingly, "worthy of being copied by little boys and girls after they have mastered straight strokes and pothooks; but to-night I must request the aged to humour my whim, and my whim is to absent myself from this symposium. I have got a splitting headache, and am altogether pretty nearly dead-beat. I have hardly a leg to stand upon: if you won't take it as a personal insult, I have

a good mind to turn in at once. I have not been in bed, for any time worth speaking of, for the last ten days."

"Indeed!" replies Constance, freezing up, and looking as though tortures should not wring from her any question as to what had been the vicious pursuits that had detained her lover from balmy slumbers. "You will please yourself, of course."

"If every one pleased themselves, and no one else, this would be a much more passable world to live in," retorts St. John, with a little misanthropy; "for then each person would get their fair share of attention neither more nor less, which is what they do not now."

But the last half of his sentence is addressed to himself, as his madonna has retired again within her shrine.

Meanwhile, for the first time since her brother's death, the "companion"—the nice, quiet, young ladylike person, whose only fault is being over-sensitive—is, like Constance, making a toilette. Since Jack's

death she has daily put on her clothes, as a necessary preliminary to the day's work; but it has been a task full of weariness—devoid of pleasure. To-night, like Constance, she makes a toilette, and like Constance, it is for the benefit of the young man who does not know gingham from "gaze de Chambéry." It is not, however, with any faintest hope that her Sunday frock, any more than her workaday one, will bring back her lost lover to her side, that she puts the former on. The very strength of her faith in his honour hinders the possibility of his turning away from the woman he has promised to marry to any other woman from entering her head. Only, seeing, as plainly as if it were another's and not her own, the ruin of the face that meets her, daily and nightly, in the dim oval of the old glass in its tarnished frame, she wishes that that ruin might be revealed slowly, and by degrees (not *all at once*), to him that had once thought her so fair. For this one

night, she would fain look like her old self—would fain be pretty plump Esther Craven, whose face, dimpled and *débonnaire*, men used to turn round in the street to look after—instead of the thin depressed "companion," whom if men looked at at all, it was only to pity her sunken white cheeks and sombre mourning weeds. Her Sunday frock is a lugubrious combination of cheap black silk and crape, against which her artistic eye has been revolting ever since she heard of St. John's coming. A little white tucker will not make her any the less mindful of Jack. And so she has been devoting most of the short winter daylight to the inserting of such a tucker, and to cutting the funereal body square. The alterations have been effected, now the Sunday frock is on: if it had been costliest velvet or satin, instead of papery silk at two-and-sixpence a yard, its black could not have contrasted better with the milkwhite of the long lily throat and swelling bust. Esther has lost flesh

a good deal lately; but, being small-boned and thoroughly well-made, no unsightly hollows show as yet, like salt-cellars, beneath her collar-bones — not yet are elbows or shoulders sharp. Brilliancy of colouring is gone; but the head, arched like the Clyte's, is still left, and great plenty of night-dark hair to clothe it. Instead of the unnatural protuberance of a chignon, she has arranged this hair in the thick plain twists with which in the old time Miss Blessington's betrothed used—

. . . . "to play
Not knowing——,"

and, so playing, spoke in loving commendation of them. In like twists Miss Blessington herself often disposes her locks —twists purchased by her for a considerable price from M. Isidore, golden hair being hard to match, and consequently expensive.

It is five minutes to six. The toilette

is finished, and Esther stands before the glass considering it; but with none of the triumphant self-content with which a fine woman usually regards the victory that art and nature, fighting side by side, have achieved on the battle-field of her face. Colour had been Esther's strong point, and colour has gone from her; as it goes from a violet sent in a letter, or from a poppy dried between the leaves of a love-song. A raging desire for rouge, raddle, plate-powder — anything to bring back that flower-flush that used to need no persuasion to stay with her—enters her mind. But neither rouge nor raddle is near, and for plate-powder she would have to apply to the butler—an effort for which not even her great wish to appear once more red-cheeked before her ex-lover can nerve her. Suddenly, her eyes fall on a spray of scarlet geranium, that, plucked this morning in the conservatory, she has worn all day in the breast of her dress. A recollection comes to her of

having, when a child, crushed one of those dazzling flowers against the face of another child, and of having laughed with pleasure at the scarlet stain. She snatches up eagerly some of the petals, and rubs them on her cheeks; the hue produced, though too scarlet for nature, is vivid and beautifying. She sets to work on the other cheek.

Esther is not a very cunning artiste; she has no idea of softening off edges with cotton-wool—of working deftly from cheekbone downwards. She is only possessed by a great longing to get back, for this one night, something of her old brilliancy. And in this she partially succeeds. The result of her labours is, indeed, a too hectic bloom; but the bright colour seems to fill up somewhat the hollowed cheeks—seems to bring back a little of the old childish *débonnaire* grace. Her labour ended, she runs downstairs quickly—not giving herself time for remorse at the meretricious nature of her charms, and

listens, trembling all over, at the saloon-door before entering. There is no sound except the rolling grunts with which, unheard by himself, the old gentleman accompanies every respiration. A footman crosses the hall; the "companion" must not be caught eavesdropping; she turns the door-handle and goes in.

The old squire, with coat-tails under his arms, standing on tottery old legs before the fire; the old lady, in her evening-cap, sunk in armchair and Shetland shawls; Miss Blessington, with blue bands binding close her waved golden hair, and an expression of face less bland than usual, on the ottoman. No one else.

"How smart you are, my dear!" the old lady says, not unkindly, her faded eyes straying slowly over the square-cut bodice, white tucker, and cabled hair. "Is that in honour of Mr. Gerard?"

"It is rather thrown away if it is," says Mr. Gerard's future owner, with some temper: "St. John has chosen to make

an invalid of himself to-night, and has gone to bed."

No need now for the geranium dye: a great hot blush burns through it—burns throat and brow and neck; she has *made herself up* in vain.

"Gone to bed!" repeats Mrs. Blessington, raising herself a little from among her pillows—"at *six* o'clock! Dear me, love, I hope he is not ill! I thought he seemed rather absent when he was talking to me before I went to dress; and he left the room so abruptly too! Are you sure, Constance, that he would not like something sent up to him?"

"He is quite able to take care of himself, I assure you—thanks, aunt," replies Constance, not without a vexed ring in her low flute voice. "If we served him right, we should accept him as the invalid he pretends himself, and allow him nothing but a little water-gruel or arrowroot."

"It seems so unnatural, a young man going to bed without his dinner; I'm sure,

dear, I hope it is nothing serious," cries the old lady, with that righteous horror of death and sickness which, by some strange contrariety, one finds so often amongst the aged, so seldom amongst the young.

"Nothing more serious than the natural results of ten days' Irish hospitality," replies Constance, with a laugh, which, though low and highbred, is not mirthful; "men are so fond of one another's society when they get together, that they never can take it in moderation. I dislike bachelor parties particularly."

"He is making the most of his time, my dear—he knows it is short," suggests the old lady, smiling and nodding, and looking wise.

"Quite right, too!—quite right! Sensible fellow!—knows when he is well off! So did I when I was his age—eh, Mrs. Blessington?" chimes in the squire, who, for a wonder, has caught the drift of the talk; chuckling to himself at the recollection—perfectly clear, though he forgets

what happened yesterday—of the pleasant immoralities that have the weight of over half a century lying upon them.

"Dinner!" announces the butler, coming close up to his master, and bawling unnecessarily loud.

"You'll have to be content with the old squire again, Conny, my dear," says the old man, putting out his feeble arm; "you'll find the old fellows are best, after all."

"I quite agree with you, uncle—I think they are," replies Constance, gravely; and so, the old man supported on one young girl's arm, and the old woman on another's, the procession toddles solemnly, at a snail's pace, into the carefully-warmed and shaded dining-room.

"What a brilliant colour you have to-night, Miss Craven!" says Constance that evening; endeavouring vainly to get a strong light thrown upon Esther's countenance—the one small lamp, with its deep green shade, effectually baffling her.

"I went out in the wind, and it caught my face," answers Esther, hurriedly: involuntarily raising her hands to her cheeks and then snatching them away again, in the fear that the scarlet dye, staining them, may betray her secret.

"But there was no wind to-day, and I did not think that you had been outside the doors?"

"Yes, I was; I went for a run in the park just before dressing-time."

"It must have been quite dark."

"It is never *quite* dark out-of-doors; total darkness is a human invention, I think; there is always a sort of *owl* light."

Constance shrugs her shoulders: "*Chacun à son goût*, I prefer leaving it to the owls."

"It stifles me staying indoors all day; I have never been used to it."

Miss Blessington unbuttons her great eyes a little: "Really?"

"Yes, really."

"But there was no wind, surely?" persists Constance.

"Not a breath!" replies the other, absently, forgetting her former excuse for her brilliant face. "There never is any wind worth calling a wind in these low countries; the winds keep to the mountains, and very wise of them too."

"But you said it was the wind that had caught your face?" says Constance, raising herself from her lounging attitude with more animation than is customary to her.

Esther starts. "Oh! so I did—I forgot; I meant the air, of course."

Constance looks slightly sceptical, but is too well-bred to pursue her inquiries further; merely saying, languidly, as she rearranges the cushions upon which her stately shoulders rest posed, "Glycerine-cream is the best thing in the world for a chapped face."

"Is it?" answers Essie, guiltily conscious that a little cold water is the only

glycerine-cream needed to effect the cure of *her* chapped face.

"Have you seen St. John since he came?" asks Constance, presently; the links that connect his name with her artificially-reddened countenance being painfully evident to Miss Craven.

"No—yes—no, not to speak to."

"You were out when he came, I suppose, weren't you?"

"No, I was upstairs."

"I have not told him you are here; it will be a surprise to him to meet an old acquaintance."

Esther gives an involuntary start of dismay. "Why did not you tell him?" she asks, hurriedly.

"*I!* Oh, I don't know; I have the worst memory in the world. I have intended to tell him in every letter, but I have always forgotten."

"Will he stay here long?" asks Miss Blessington's unsuccessful rival, in a low voice, bending down her head.

"I don't know, I'm sure; he is always so full of engagements, and I never allow him to refuse a good invitation on my account."

"Will your wedding be soon, Miss Blessington?" (spoken quietly and firmly).

"I really have not thought about it" (with a little yawn, as if the subject were rather a wearisome one than otherwise); "'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' I don't suppose I shall be given more than two or three months longer; some time in the spring, I daresay."

"I always think it is a good omen when people are married in the spring," says the young companion, with a dreamy smile; "when the world is beginning all over again, it is right that people's new life should begin with it."

"Do you think so? I don't much believe in omens. May is certainly the best time for Paris. I have set my heart upon seeing the Grand Prix run for; unfortunately, St. John hates Paris."

"All men hate all towns, I think, except American men; 'good Americans when they die go to Paris,' somebody said, didn't they?"

"Did they? It was rather irreverent, don't you think? By-the-by, some one told me in the summer that you were engaged to be married; is it true? I hope you won't think me impertinent for asking."

"Not in the least; but it is not true."

"Really? How odd it is the way those sort of reports get about!"

"Very odd; people are singularly fond of pairing their neighbours, but they don't often hit upon the right pairs."

"Perhaps not," answers Constance, closing her eyes, and looking bored, whereupon Esther lapses into silence.

Every Jack has his Jill; but my Jill is probably in Siberia or Hong Kong, and yours is close at hand; so I marry yours, and you, being in Siberia or Hong Kong, marry mine, and we both rue it to our dying day.

CHAPTER V.

Next morning St. John wakes, recovered from his ill-temper, his headache, and all the effects of his Irish saturnalia. Perhaps, had he known who it was that lay wakeful in a great ginger four-poster, two doors off, his slumbers would not have been so profound. The hounds meet twelve miles away, at Shepherd's Hatch. By nine o'clock he is in the saddle, and riding quietly along the deep Essex lanes and wet fields, with a soft south wind blowing in his face, and the grass, crisped by the slightest possible frost, beneath the horse's hoofs.

He is lucky enough to come in for the run of the season; has the satisfaction of seeing many better men than himself floundering, hatless and well-watered, in

a brook, or getting croppers over stiff hawthorn hedges; over all which obstacles his grey, a new investment, of whose fencing powers he and his groom had been unjustly doubtful, carries him like a bird. As to whether his ladylove may relish this early preference of "bold Reynolds" to herself, any more than she relished his fatigue and headache last night, he troubles himself but little. He has no intention whatever of being a henpecked husband. When he proposed to her, he told her what he could give her, and what he could not—what she might expect, and what she might not; nor has this day's desertion been any departure from his half of the bargain. Somewhere about five o'clock he is back again at Blessington, splashed from head to heel; his tops, in which this morning you might have seen your face, all stained and discoloured; with a dab of mud on each cheek, and a third on the bridge of his nose. He runs upstairs lightly,

whistling a tune, and has just reached the first landing, when, "Click-clack," he hears a woman's high-heeled shoes descending. It is Esther, who is walking listlessly down, with her eyes fixed on a great picture let into the wall—a large white woman, with her clothes tumbling off, hurling her substantial person upon a spear; a young man, with arms like a blacksmith's, lying on the ground, making a profuse display of his charms, and, though with no very perceptible wound, evidently *in articulo mortis;* a fat Cupid blubbering hard by—the whole entitled "Pyramus and Thisbe."

St. John looks upward, to see who the author of the "click-clacking" may be. "Who the devil is this pretty girl?" is his first thought. His second—a thought that makes him stagger back with the colour hurrying from his healthy cheek—a thought full of anger, astonishment, desire, and pain—a thought that involuntarily he speaks aloud, is "Esther."

At almost the same moment she has caught sight of him. In her case, there is no surprise; but the pain is as great, if not greater.

"Yes, it is I," she answers, almost inaudibly, trembling all over.

His first impulse seems to be to rush away from her, to pass quickly upstairs; his second takes him to her side.

"In Heaven's name, what brings *you* here?" he asks, in a voice almost as low as her own, from intense repressed emotion.

No answer. His voice has carried her back, across the gulf of Jack's death, of her own servitude and failing health, to that night when, in the starry Felton fields, she had stood by his side, his beloved promised wife. She is silent—struggling with a strong, vile, degrading temptation to fling down her tired head upon the shoulder of Miss Blessington's affianced husband, and weep out loud.

"Are you on a visit here?" he asks again, with stern brevity.

"Yes," she answers bitterly, strengthened by his tone, in which there is small kindness and much wrath; "I am paid fifty pounds a year to visit here."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I am Mr. and Mrs. Blessington's 'companion.'"

"Good God! You are here *always*, then?"

"Always."

A pause! Against his will his eyes dwell upon her, hungry and fierce, astonied at the alteration wrought in her whom he had once thought fairest among women. Faded, wasted, forlorn, to his cost he finds that he still thinks her so.

"Is this bondage to last all your life, then?" he inquires more collectedly, after a few seconds.

"Until they die, or until my voice fails."

"And what then?"

"I must look out for some other old people, to whom I can be ears, and voice, and feet."

"Good God! And what *can* be your motive?"

"One *must* live."

"I had thought the world wide enough for two people to walk apart," he says, with almost a groan. "I have entreated God that I might never look on your face again, and this is how my prayer is answered."

Another pause. "Tick-tack—tick-tack—tick-tack," goes a clock in the gallery overhead.

"You look extremely ill!"

"Do I?"

"You are wonderfully altered!"

"Yes, I know it!"

"What is it ails you?"

"Nothing."

"What does *this* mean?"—touching her black dress with a jealous pang of fear that his innocent rival, the "lout who gave her the sixpenny Prayer Book, and inscribed his name with a crooked pin on the flyleaf," is numbered with the dead;

and that the hollow cheeks, dejected droop of the head, and crape-covered garments are for him.

The tears crowd into her eyes; they know the way there so well now. She turns away, and leans against the bannisters to hide them.

A light breaks in upon him. He remembers that she had a brother, her girlish rhapsodies about whom used to make him rather impatient.

"I see," he says, in a softer tone; "forgive me for asking."

Encouraged by his voice, she lifts her face towards him with a tearful smile.

"You may be satisfied, I think," she says, simply. "You have had your revenge; I have been punished almost enough."

Revenge is sweet, they say; but at this moment I do not think that St. John finds it so.

"You did not know that I was here?" she asks presently.

"Know it!" he repeats, passionately. "Not I. Do you suppose I would have come within a hundred miles of this house if I had known it?"

"I will try to keep out of your way," she answers, meekly.

"For God's sake, do! It is the most merciful thing that you can do for both of us."

"I would leave this place to-day, if I could," she answers, humbly, raising her wistful deprecating eyes to his; "but I cannot. My daily bread is here—yours is not. Why cannot you go?"

He hesitates. "I ought, I suppose," he answers, doubtfully. "I will, if you wish it."

"It is as *you* wish," she replies.

Footmen are passing to and fro through the hall, busy with preparations for dinner; any moment Mr. Gerard's blue-and-white angel may come sweeping downstairs, and surprise them.

"I have not congratulated you yet, Mr. Gerard," Esther says, timidly.

"Congratulated me!—what upon?" he asks, absently, staring vacantly at her.

"Upon your engagement to Miss Blessington."

A shade crosses his face. "Oh yes, to be sure! I had forgotten. Thanks! you are very good, I'm sure."

"I hope you will be very happy—*quite* happy."

"Thanks! Wish that I may be Prime Minister, or Commander-in-Chief, or something equally probable, while you are about it," he says, sardonically.

"I wish you to be happy," she repeats gently, "and I hope that is not improbable."

"Such a wish in your mouth is something like a butcher with his knife at its throat wishing a sheep a long life!"

A guilty sense of hypocrisy in wishing him happy whom, less than forty-eight hours ago, she had been congratulating herself on his certain misery, keeps her dumb.

"Why could not you have sent me word that you were here, and I would have kept away?" he asks, flashing angrily upon her.

"I asked Miss Blessington to tell you, but she forgot."

He turns away with a muttered exclamation, not benedictory towards his betrothed, between his teeth.

"I will try to be as little annoyance to you as I can," says the poor child, in bitter mortification. "You will be out hunting most of the day, I daresay, and, except when I am waiting upon either Mr. and Mrs. Blessington, I am not often downstairs."

He takes no notice of her submissive speech, but stands, with his eyes moodily downcast, upon the white stone of the cold carpetless stairs.

"Believe me, I would go away, if I could," she says, piteously. "I did not wish to be in your way; but I had nowhere to go to."

A shade of pity softens his stern face.

"Are they kind to you?" he asks abruptly.

"Yes—oh yes—quite kind."

"And what, in God's name," he says slowly, as if the question were forced from him against his will, by the slender fragility of her figure, by the pallid delicacy of her face—"And what in God's name, can have induced your friends to allow you to accept such a situation, for which you are about as well fitted as I for the archbishopric of Canterbury?"

"I have not many friends, and I did not ask the advice of the few I have."

"They ought to have given it unasked," he says, gruffly.

"So they did, but I did not take it."

"Well, it is no business of mine," he says, harshly, ashamed and angry at himself for his temporary lapse into friendliness. "God knows I have had as good reason to hate you, and wish you ill, as ever man had! I *have* hated you," he says,

with fierce heartiness, "during the last three months, as I should not have thought it possible to hate anything so weak and tender. I *hope* I hate you still!"

Remembering how much deeplier she had sinned against that other, and with how godlike a fulness and freedom he had pardoned her, she feels her heart rise up against him.

"The worse case I see you in, the more I ought to rejoice—the more I *should* have rejoiced yesterday," he continues, with rapid passion; "and yet—and yet——"

He passes his hand across his forehead, pushing the hair away; and not even the dab of mud on his nose can hinder the expression of his countenance from having something of a tragical pathos in it.

"And yet what?" she asks tremulously, moving a step nearer to him.

"And yet, for the life of me, while I am *with* you, I cannot. When I am away from you, I can remember what you *are*; when I am with you, I see only what you

seem. Esther! Esther! why, in God's name, don't the two tally better?"

"Whether they tally or not can be of but little concern to you now, Mr. Gerard," she answers, with some exasperation.

His brown cheek flushes into shamed angry-red.

"You are right," he says, stiffly. "It *is* no concern of mine; I am sorry I needed reminding."

"Why must we waste time digging that poor old past out of its grave?" she says, with persuasive gentleness, as her hand lays itself lightly, as if half afraid of being shaken off, upon his scarlet sleeve. "Why cannot we let bygones, that" (with a sigh) "are so completely bygones, be bygones? I did you an injury once—not an irreparable one, you will allow, since it is already repaired" (smiling half-scornful, half-melancholy); "and my whole life since has been a punishment—O God! *what* a punishment!" (putting her hand for a second over her eyes). "I am tired of

being punished now. We shall see very little of one another henceforth, but that little might as well be in civility as in incivility—mightn't it?"

"Civility!"—he repeats, without much of that quality in his tone—"civility between you and me! And what would that end in, pray? It would be oversweet at first, and bitterer than wormwood afterwards, as our former *civility* was. No—no! we will have no sophisms, no absurd Platonisms here! God forbid my thrusting myself into temptation again! We will say 'good morning' and 'good evening' to one another, as people would remark it if we did not. But for the rest, let us hold our tongues and keep apart; and as soon as I can do it, without exciting great question, you may rely upon my going; and then we shall have done with one another for good, I pray God!"

She bends her head submissively. "You are right, I think."

"Click-clack—click-clack," come other

high-heeled shoes; "swish! swish!" a long dress trails along. From the heaven of the upper regions the blue-and-white angel is in the act of descent. Without another word, the two part—the woman going quickly down, the man as quickly up.

"Good morning, Conny! Rather late in the day to say 'good morning,' isn't it?"

This is his greeting, accompanied with a rather constrained laugh, to his future proprietor.

"So you and Miss Craven have been renewing your acquaintance upon the landing?" replies the divinity, smiling a little inquisitively. "I was looking down at you from the gallery; you looked so picturesque!"

"If being cased from top to toe in black mud is picturesque, I am eminently so," answers he, looking down at his legs to hide a transient expression of confusion. "Well, good-bye for the present; I suppose I must be going to adorn for this unearthly meal."

CHAPTER VI.

No one ever accused the dinners *en famille* at Felton of being too lively; but, that evening, Gerard decides that they yield the palm, in point of perfect stagnation, to Blessington. There is, indeed, none of that lynx-eyed watching of the servants, none of that pouncing upon their minutest derelictions, which makes dining in Sir Thomas's company so thoroughly uncomfortable a process: no one calls the fat red-faced butler and the two blue-and-yellow footmen "hounds, louts, fools."

At Blessington, indeed, the servants have things pretty much their own way; and, accustomed to their master's total and mistress's partial deafness, have got into a habit of conversing with one another

in a tone of voice considerably above that usually considered seemly in civilised *ménages*. With one member of the company (Miss Craven) St. John has entered into a pact to exchange no remarks, good or bad; a second member (Mr. Blessington) contributes nothing to the conversation but a series of inarticulate though loud mumblings over his food—with the exception of a question, addressed to the butler, as to what the viands upon the table under his sightless eyes consist of. "'Aricot—Volly Vong—Line of Mutton—Biled Turkey," enumerates that functionary, glibly, at the top of his voice. From a third member (Mrs. Blessington) St. John has already heard all that is to be said on the subject of draughts and sandbags; and with the fourth member, conversation always drives as heavily as a loaded waggon dragged up a perpendicular hill.

The evening is but a prolongation of the dinner, with the additional disadvantage of there being no eating and drinking to

employ the otherwise unoccupied jaws. "England expects every man to do his duty!" She expects every man who has the misfortune to be in the position of an affianced to sit, hours long, idle beside his betrothed—however ardently his soul may be sighing for a sheet of the *Times* or a whiff of Latakia: to hold converse with no other man, woman, or child, if she be in the room.

Since, at the entrance of the gentlemen, Constance looked up expectant, and since he has a vague idea that it is part of his share of their bargain to pay her all outward observance and attention, St. John seats himself on the sofa beside her. She sits rather forward, upright as a dart; he leans back, with his arms resting on the sofa behind her. It is not a caress; but, from a little distance, it has the air of one. The old gentleman, rendered surprisingly wakeful by the unwonted incident of the addition of a stranger to his little circle, insists upon hearing a pungent article on

Gladstone and the Irish Church, over which he had fallen asleep in the morning, re-read to him by his little white slave.

"I am afraid I can hardly see, Mr. Blessington; there is so little light!" she has remonstrated, mildly.

"Light!—pooh!" repeats the old gentleman, gaily. "What do young eyes like yours want with light? They ought to be able to see in the dark, like cats. You'll be borrowing Mrs. Blessington's spectacles next—eh, Mrs. Blessington?"

"Mrs. Blessington is asleep, Mr. Blessington."

"Oh! Go on, then, my dear—go on. Let us hear what they have got to say for those rascally placehunters, who are trying to remove the landmarks of the Constitution for the sake of getting into office."

Her long damp evening rambles—rambles on which a mother would have put so decided a veto—have brought back Miss Craven's cold. She has been hoarse all day; and it is a well-known fact that

hoarseness always becomes worse towards night: a tiresome little tickling cough interrupts her every moment. Add to which, her attention is completely distracted from the subject in hand by the involuntary and vain effort to catch what Mr. Gerard and his love are saying to one another. She would hardly have been repaid for her trouble had she succeeded.

"Had you a good run to-day?"

"Yes, rather a quick thing."

"Which horse did you ride?"

"The grey—one you have not seen. I bought her in Ireland of Brownrigg: *he* required more of a weight-carrier."

"Does she seem likely to prove satisfactory?"

"Very: she has a good turn of speed, jumps capitally, and is very temperate."

"Was it a large field?"

"Middling."

"Any one you knew?"

"Two or three" (with a yawn).

"You are going out to-morrow again,

of course?"—with a slight attempt at a pout, which is not even perceived by the person for whose benefit it is intended.

"No, I think not; it is five-and-twenty miles, and the trains do not fit: one gets lazy in one's old age. I suppose I shall agree soon with Brakespeare, of the —th, who sent seven horses down to Melton last year; and at the end of the season confessed that he hated hunting, and that he thought it a very dangerous amusement."

"Really?" answers Constance, who always takes everything *au sérieux*, opening her great eyes.

"No, not really—most assuredly!" he answers, laughing lazily. "On the contrary, I am nearer coinciding with the opinion of the Jewish gentleman, who said it would be a very pleasant world if there were no *shummers* and no *shabbaths*."

It is hardly worth Miss Craven's while, you will perceive, to lose her place twice, and get rated by her old employer, for the sake of hearing brilliant questions and

answers of the above description. Though her jealous eyes are fixed upon the *Saturday's* columns, they see, none the less clearly, those two figures reclined upon the distant sofa. Once she sees St. John raise himself, and, stooping forward over his companion, speak with more animation than he had yet used. If she break the drum of her ear in the attempt, she *must* catch the drift of that remark — some delicious tender nothing, no doubt. She succeeds:

"By-the-by, Conny, how was the lump on your pony's leg when you left home?"

As another and another article follow the first, Esther's cough becomes increasingly troublesome: her throat aches with the effort of reading: her voice at each paragraph waxes huskier and huskier. For several minutes past Gerard's answers to Miss Blessington's questions have been growing ever more wildly random; suddenly he leaves the sofa, and comes over to Mr. Blessington's armchair.

"Will you let *me* read to you a bit?" he asks, in that loud unmodulated roar that people unused to the deaf think the only method of making them hear.

"Eh! what does he say?" inquires the old gentleman, sharply, lifting his head, and peering blindly up in the direction whence the voice came.

"I asked whether you would let *me* read to you, for a change, instead of Miss Craven?"

"No—thanks, no," replies the old man, ungraciously. "Much obliged to you, but I cannot hear a word you say; you run all your words into one another."

"Do I? I daresay," rejoins Gerard, good-humouredly; "but have you ever heard me read? I think not."

"Begging your pardon, I have, though; I heard you read prayers here one Sunday evening."

"And I am afraid my mode of conducting divine worship has not left a pleasant impression," says the young man,

laughing. "Well, but I promise to read as slow as ever you choose, and to count four at every full-stop."

"No—no," cries the old man, obstinately. "Get away with you, my dear boy! you are interrupting us. No offence, but we are very happy without you—aren't we, Miss Esther? You attend to your own business; we don't offer to help you in that—do we—eh, my dear?"

Baffled and vexed, St. John stands silent; and as he so stands, the young girl lifts her great meek eyes, dumbly grateful, to his. He has forbidden her to speak to him, but he cannot lay an embargo upon the gentle messages sent from those sorrowful shining orbs. His own meet them for an instant; then he turns away with a half-shudder.

"What a churchyard cough that girl has!" says Miss Blessington, fanning herself gently, as he reseats himself beside her; "it really quite fidgets one. Of course it is very unjust of one, but I

always feel so *angry* with a person who goes 'cough, cough, cough' every minute."

"I feel angrier with the person who is the cause of it," answers Gerard, thoroughly chafed: "it is positive barbarity. You see what success *I* met with when I tried to relieve guard. Suppose you offer: you can always make him hear!"

"I should be delighted," answers Conny, blandly; "only, unfortunately, this damp weather makes my throat so relaxed" (touching the firm round pillar with two white slender fingers), "that I really should be afraid."

"Just try—there's a good girl," urges he, coaxingly; "you can stop in a minute if you find that it hurts you."

A mulish expression comes into her face; small good would persuasion, cajolery, threats, or promises do now!

"I am very sorry I cannot oblige you; but as I am to dine out on Thursday, and one is always expected to sing, I really must nurse my voice."

CHAPTER VII.

"When the days begin to lengthen,
Then the cold begins to strengthen."

This ancient distich proves true in the year I am speaking of. Not later than Christmas does the moist mild weather last. With January the frost comes hurrying back; hanging great icicles on the house-eaves, throwing men out of work, and pressing with its iron finger the thin faint life out of half-a-dozen old almsmen and almswomen. The foxes have a little breathing-time—a little space in which to steal and eat three or four more fat capons and stubble-fed geese—before that evil day when their dappled foes shall tear their poor little red bodies limb from limb. Hunting is stopped, and men are hurrying

up from the shires to London. St. James's Street and its hundred clubs are crowded. At Blessington everybody is pirouetting on the ice. St. John, passionately fond of all out-of-door sports, spends the whole day on the mere. One afternoon a large party comes over from Lord Linley's place, five miles away. Not in all Lord Linley's grounds is there such a stretch of smooth ice as the Blessington pool affords; and so they are all come to show their prowess on its hard flat face.

Esther keeps well out of their way. From her post of observation—the deep window-seat in the China gallery—she has watched their arrival, heard their gay voices in the hall, and then, unnoticed, unmissed, she has stolen out upon one of her long, dawdling, cold-giving strolls in the park: over the frost-crisped grass, under the branchy trees, whose staglike crowns cut the pale sky—up little knolls and down into dips where, in summer time, the fern stands neck high. At last

she comes in sight of the mere; and, impelled by curiosity, trusting in her own insignificance to escape notice, sits down on a bank that slopes gently down towards the sheet of water, and looks upon the unwonted brilliance of the scene. Girls in velvet short costumes; bright petticoats, furs, hats with humming birds on them, curls, fair chignons, glancing in the cheerful winter sun. Fashion in all its folly and extravagance, but picturesque withal; it is as if a company of Dresden shepherdesses had stepped off the mantel-shelf, and come tripping, dainty-footed, over the frozen water. Her eyes follow the shepherdess figures with eager interest —so seldom in her simple country-bred life has she been brought into contact with any of Fashion's bright daughters. The men have less attraction for her. Under no most prosperous conjunction of circumstances could she ever have been a man; but under happier auspices she might have been one of those fluttering

butterflies—a prettier butterfly than any there, her heart tells her. Shylock's words recur to her: "Am not I 'fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer?' Why, then, are they frisking about in purple and fine linen upon the ice, with half-a-dozen young patricians (in trousers of surprising tightness and coats of unequalled brevity) in their train, while I am perched here upon the all-alone stone, among these stiff cold sedges, with only the Canada geese, with their long necks craned out, screeching above my head?"

Meanwhile, Miss Craven is the subject of more remark than she is at all aware of.

"I say, Gerard," says Lord Linley's heir—a goodnatured ugly little prodigal, who is one of the shining lights of Her Majesty's Household, and goes among men by the *sobriquet* of "Gaolbird," for which he has to thank the unexampled

brevity of his locks—"I say, Gerard, you ought to know all the remarkable objects about here: tell us, who is the *mourner* in the distance?"

St. John's eyes follow the direction indicated by his friend, and a shade of annoyance crosses his face. "Her name is Miss Craven, I believe," he answers, shortly.

"Uncommon good-looking girl, whoever she is!" says a second man, who has just stopped to adjust his skates: "I have been perilling my life among those d—d rushes by the edge, to get a good look at her!"

"Deuced good legs!" subjoins a third, remarkable for his laconism; taking his pipe out of his mouth to make room for his criticism, and fixing upon that part of a woman's charms which is always the first to enchain the masculine attention.

"She is vewy like a girl I used to know at the Cape," says a "Heavy," who has been vanquished in single combat by the

letter R. "The *Fly* we used to call her, because when she settled on a f'la, it was mowally impossible to dwive her off."

St. John, who has been listening with ill-concealed anger and disgust to these comments—free as if they had been upon the points of a horse—on the charms of the woman for whom he has been trying to persuade himself that he feels inveterate aversion, turns to move away; but Linley's voice recalls him.

"I say, Gerard!—Gerard!"

"Well?"

"Do you know her?"

"Slightly."

"Introduce me, then—there's a good fellow!"

"And me!"

"And me!"

"My acquaintance with Miss Craven is not such as to justify my introducing any one to her," answers Gerard, stiffly, and so walks resolutely off.

"Sly dog!" cries Linley, laughing; "means to keep her all to himself—a nice quiet little game of his own."

"Means to drive a pair then—eh?" asks the laconic youth.

"Vewy seldom pays," says the "Heavy," sagely; "one or other invawiably jibs."

But Mr. Linley, being more in earnest than he usually is about most things, is not so easily balked. After many fruitless inquiries among the company, he at length appeals to Miss Blessington.

"Do you know, Miss Blessington," he says, peering up at her with his quick terrier-face (for her stately height exceeds his), "I have actually been putting the same question to twenty people running, and never yet succeeded in getting an answer? You are my last hope: who *is* that lady in black?"

"The lady in black!" repeats Constance, amiably—following, as her lover had done, the direction of his gaze. "Oh!" (with a little slighting laugh),

"nobody very particular; only poor Miss Craven, my aunt's companion!"

"Poor girl!" he says—his eyes still riveted upon the pensive oval face, and his interest in her not the least lessened by the information as to her social status, that Constance had thought so damning. He does not want to *marry* her; and for any other purpose a pretty woman is a pretty woman, be she duchess or fishwife. "It must be very slow for her, mustn't it? I always hate looking on—don't you? I always like to have a hand in everything, whatever it may be; it would really be a charity to go and speak to her, only I'm afraid she would take it as an insult if I went up and introduced myself."

"I assure you she is quite happy watching us," replies Constance, sweetly; being, for the most part, not fond of going shares with a sister fair one in any of the proper men and tall that are wont to gather about her.

But he is persevering. "Don't you

think that a little improving conversation with me would tend to make her happier still?" he asks, banteringly, yet in earnest. "I tried to get Gerard to introduce me, but I could not make out exactly what was up; he seemed to take it as a personal insult. You won't mind doing me that good turn, I'm sure?"

"I shall be most happy, of course," she answers, hiding her displeasure under the calm smile which covers all her emotions, or approximations to emotion. And with apparent readiness she leads the way to the spot where, couched in her rushy lair, the subject of their talk sits unconscious, with her eyes riveted on the darting forms beneath her.

"Miss Craven, Mr. Linley wishes to be introduced to you."

"To *me!*" she says, starting; her eyes opening wide, and cheeks flushing with surprise.

Then two bows are executed, and the thing is done. Esther is not longer upon

the all-alone-stone; she has other occupation for her ears than to listen to the screeching of the Canada geese; she too, like the other butterflies, has got a tight-trousered short-coated patrician in tow.

"Linley has succeeded, do you see?" says the man to whom Esther's legs have had the happiness to appear "very good."

"Mostly does; it is a little way he has!"

"Who did they say she was?"

"Somebody's companion; old Blessington's, I think."

"Cunning old beggar! He knows what he is about, though he does pretend to be stone-blind."

"Old Blessington's companion, eh? I'm sure I wish she were mine."

"A sort of 'Abishag the Shunammite,' I suppose?"

These are some of the comments that the unknown beauty draws forth. Five minutes later, Miss Craven's scruples—such as never having skated before, having

no skates, &c.—being overruled by her new acquaintance, she is sitting on the bank; and he, kneeling before her, is fastening some one else's unused skates on her little feet. A great desire for pleasure has come over her—a great longing for warmth and colour in her grey life, that looks all the greyer now in the contrast to the brilliant reds and purples of these strange lives with which it is brought into sudden contact. A great delight in the wintry brightness fills her—in the shifting varying hues—in the bubbling laughter; a great impulse to laugh too, the spirit of youth rising up in arms against the tyranny of grief.

The low sun shoots down dazzling crimson rays on the mere's dirty white face. The swans and Solan geese are exiled to a little corner, where the ice has been broken for them, and where they have to keep swimming round and round to prevent the invasion of their little territory by the grasping frost. Girls that cannot

skate being pushed about in chairs; "Whirr! whirr!" they rush along the smooth surface at a headlong pace. Men, with their arms stretched out like the sails of a windmill, advancing cautiously—first one foot, then the other—just managing to keep on their feet, and thinking themselves extremely clever for so managing. Other men and women flying hand-in-hand, from one end of the pool to the other, in long smooth slides—as safe and secure as if running upon their own feet on the grass. Others, cutting eights and all manner of figures, whirling round upon one leg, and making themselves altogether remarkable. One poor gentleman, with his skates in the air, and head starring the ice; brother men laughing and jeering; pretty girls pitying—light laughter mixed with their condolences also. Eight people dancing a quadrille, *chaîne des dames:* in and out, in and out—right, left—go the moving figures, the cerise petticoats, the glancing feet. It is all so

pretty and gay. When one has spent the best part of three months in weeping, when one has the quick blood of seventeen in one's veins, one longs to get up and run, and dance, and jump about too.

"There's no wind to-day," says Linley, turning his face to the north-east, whence a bitter breath comes most faintly; "when there is, it is the best fun in the world to get a very light cane-chair and a big umbrella—to sit on the one and hold the other up; you can have no conception of the terrific rate that one gets along at."

"I should think it sometimes happened that the cane-chair and the big umbrella went on by themselves and left you behind?" says Esther, archly.

"Frequently; but that makes it all the more exciting."

"Does it?"

"Keep hold of the chair, push it gently before you, and try to balance yourself as well as you can," continues he, giving grave instructions to his new pupil.

"How *can* one balance oneself on things no bigger than knife-blades?" she asks, grasping desperately the chair-back.

"Rome was not built in a day," he answers, with a cheery laugh; "try!"

She obeys, and moves forward two or three timid inches; then stops again.

"I have that poor gentleman's fate before my mind's eye," she says, nervously. "I feel as if, by some natural attraction, one's feet must go up skywards, and one's head make acquaintance with the ice."

"No necessity at all," replies the young man, encouragingly. "That fellow is a duffer at everything; he is the very worst rider I ever set eyes on—holds his whip like a fishing-rod."

"Does he?"

"Look at that girl, now, with the purple feather! She skims along like a bird; she is as much at her ease as if she were in her armchair at home. By Jove! no, she ain't, though!" For, as he speaks, "Thud!" comes the girl with the purple

feather down in a sitting posture on the ice: men crowd round, inquire into casualties, pick her up again: off she goes!

"You must be more careful next time in your selection of examples," Esther says, smiling mischievously; "*that* one was not encouraging, you must allow."

Constitutionally timid, she stands hesitating, in half-shyness, half-fear, and whole dread of being ridiculous; laughing, reddening, dimpling in the happy sunlight —as pretty a picture as ever little terrier-faced member of the Household has seen.

"Perhaps you'd get on better if you tried walking between two people," he says, suggestively; "it is easier than with a chair. That is the way my sister began— I on one side, don't you know, and another fellow on the other. Here, Gerard, come and make yourself useful; give Miss Craven your arm!"

Gerard looks—has been looking all the while; sees the face, that had met him so

pale and dejected three hours ago, transformed by the keen January air, and the excitement of the moment, into more than its old loveliness; sees the soft splendour of languishing almond eyes, the guileless baby-smile. It is the transient happiness of a moment that has wrought the change, and he, in his rough anger, attributes it to the insatiate rabid desire for admiration.

"She would flirt in her coffin," he says to himself, bitterly; and so answers, coldly, "I cannot—I have taken my skates off!"

"All right," says Mr. Linley, gaily, and then, in an aside to Esther, "On duty, evidently!"

"Evidently!" She assents, with a faint smile, but her lips quiver with a dumb pain. "He need not have slighted me so openly," she thinks, in cruel mortification. "Perhaps if you gave me your hand I might manage to steady myself gradually," she says naïvely.

Mr. Linley has no objection whatever to having his hand convulsively clutched by a very pretty woman, even though it is so clutched, not in affection to himself, but in the spasmodic effort to maintain the perpendicular—in the desperate endeavour to hinder her feet from outrunning body and head. And so she totters along—amused, flattered, frightened; and far too much absorbed in considerations of her own safety, to be at all aware of the condescending notice that several of the more worthy gender are good enough to bestow upon her though the conceit inborn in the male mind would have made them completely sceptical of that fact, had they been told it.

Meanwhile Miss Blessington, a little out of breath with her exertions, is resting on a chair, in bright blue velvet and a more delicate pink-and-white porcelain face than any of the other shepherdesses. Over her Gerard is leaning — frowning, sad, and heavy-hearted. Over and over again he

has tried to turn his eyes to other groups, but again and again, contrary to his will, they return and fix themselves upon that slender staggering figure in black. Once he sees her on the point of falling—saved only by being caught with quick adroitness in her companion's arms. He draws his breath involuntarily hard. How dare any man but he touch her—lay a finger upon her fair person? One of the old simple instincts, stronger—oh, how far stronger! —than any of the restrictions with which our civilisation has sought to bind them—a great lust of raging jealousy—is upon him.

"I *hate* her!" he says to himself, fiercely; "she is a vile unprincipled coquette. Thank God, I found her out in time! Thank God, I washed my hands of her before it was too late! And yet—and yet—if I could but pick a quarrel with that fellow!"

What right has Gerard to object if every man upon the ground catch her in his

arms, and hold her there under his very eyes? He has washed his hands of her, thank God! All his rights of proprietorship in womankind centre in the calm blue statue, smiling with even placidness on himself, on his poodle, on all the world—his Constance, whom no one is thinking of taking from him; his own—oh, blissful thought!—in life, in death, and in eternity!

In the meantime the remarks upon Esther vary from the wildly laudatory to the discriminatingly censuring.

"She is extwemely dark," says the *dwagoon*, as he would have called himself; "a thowough bwunette; must have a touch of the tar-bwush, I fancy!"

The stable-clock strikes four. Esther starts, as much as scullion Cinderella started at the chiming midnight. "I must go," she says, hastily; "I shall be wanted."

"Wanted?" he repeats, inquiringly. "And are not you wanted here? You

cannot be in two places at once, like a bird."

"Mrs. Blessington will want me—I am her companion," she answers, colouring slightly. "I daresay you did not know it." ("He would not have been so civil to me if he had, I daresay," is her mental reflection.)

"Yes, I did."

"Who told you?—or have all 'companions' such a family likeness that you detected me at a glance?"

"Miss Blessington told me; and for the first time in my life I wished myself an old woman," he replies, sentimentally.

She laughs, a little embarrassed. She knows as well as he does that he does *not* wish to be an old woman, even for the pleasure of having her to carry his air-cushion and spectacle-case. But civil speeches are always more or less untrue, and none the less pleasant for that.

"If the frost holds," says the young man, suggestively—taking the small black

hand which she has timidly proffered, not being by any means sure that it is etiquette for a "companion" to shake hands with lords' eldest sons—"If the frost holds, will you be inclined for another lesson or two? There is nothing like making hay when the sun shines—say *to-morrow?*"

Her face brightens for a moment; it is so pleasant to talk gaily, and be admired, and made much of, and reminded that there are other things besides death and poverty and servitude; then her countenance falls.

"To-day has been very pleasant," she says, naïvely, "but I cannot answer for to-morrow."

"Are you so changeable," he asks, with a laudable though unsuccessful endeavour to fashion his jolly little dog-face into an expression of reproachful sentiment, "as not to know to-day what you will like or not like to-morrow?"

"I know what *I* shall like," she an-

swers, gently, "but I don't know what other people will. Would not you think it very odd if your valet were to make engagements without consulting you? *I* am Mrs. Blessington's valet."

She evidently thinks this argument so conclusive, and that it so decidedly closes the question, that he has no choice but to loose her hand; and she, having no other farewells to make, turns and passes homewards through the crisply rustling sedges.

"*Very* clean about the fetlock!" ejaculates the laconic youth, unable to raise his mind from her legs; following them with his eyes, as she climbs the grassy slope.

"Yes, but what howible boots! Whoever could have had the atwocity to fwame such beetle-cwushers?"

CHAPTER VIII.

The frost goes, but so does not St. John. He hunts all day, and all the long evenings lounges sedulously on the sofa beside Constance, trying to feel affectionate: trying to make her talk—trying, metaphorically, to pull the string at his fine wax-doll's side, to make her say "Pap-pa" and "Mam-ma" prettily. "Since I am to spend my life with this woman," he says to himself, heavily, "I must try and make the best of her."

And, alas! alas! the best is not very good. He is thirty now, and—the Gerards are a long-lived, tough race—he may live till ninety. He asks himself, now and then, in a sort of startled terror, is he to see opposite him at breakfast, every day

for the next sixty years, this carven face, changeless as the stone saints on the walls of Felton Church? Of all the one-half of creation, is this unsuggestive, unresponsive, negative woman to be his sole portion? "It is her misfortune that she is not a woman of science," as Mr. Shandy mildly remarked of his wife, "but she *might* ask a question." Strive as he may against the conviction, the yoke that he has taken upon himself in careless apathy has already begun to gall his withers. And yet it was not (as you may imagine) *pique* that first made Gerard Miss Blessington's lover. It was partly that numb indifference as to anything that might happen to him, that always follows a great blow, partly sheer weariness of his father's importunities upon the subject of his marriage.

He is the last scion of a family that has come down in direct male line from a Norman robber: if it be tersely predicated of him on his tombstone that he died S.P.,

the Hall, and the lake, and the wide fat lands will go to some distant needy cousins, with whom Sir Thomas is at dagger's drawing, and for whom he cherishes a hatred livelier even than that which poachers, Irish beggars, and vulpecides inspire in his gentle breast. The fact of his responsibilities has been chimed into St. John's ears till he is rather weary of it; he has been hearing it for the last five-and-twenty years—ever since indeed, that solemn day when, petticoats being cast aside, he was invested with the virile dignity of round jacket and breeches.

"Why don't we cut off the entail?" he asks impatiently, one day, shortly after Esther's visit—a visit which has naturally given him a greater distaste for the subject than he had ever before experienced. "You and I together can do it, cannot we, Sir Thomas, and leave the property to the Foundling, or Hanwell, or to some hospital or penitentiary, where it would do a deal more good, I don't doubt, than it ever

has in our hands?" But he does not mean it; his pride in the old house and the old name is as great, though not as offensively shown, as his father's.

"It's all your cursed selfishness," says his parent, strutting and fuming about, one morning, over the crimson and ash-coloured squares of the library carpet; puffing out his feathers, as it were, and beginning to gobble-obble. "You prefer your lazy, lounging, club life, your French chef, and d—d sybarite habits, to everything else under heaven; you don't reflect that, when a man has been given such advantages as yours, he owes corresponding duties to his country and his estate, and —and—and his *father*——" concludes Sir Thomas, rather at a loss for a peroration.

St. John lifts his eyebrows almost imperceptibly at the last clause. "If you like to look out for a wife for me," he says, flinging himself indolently into an armchair, and speaking half-seriously, half-derisively, "and will engage to undertake

all the bore of the preliminaries—love-making, dancing attendance, etc.—I have no objection to marrying, since the duty of continuing this illustrious race has been perverse enough to devolve on me, who, God knows, am not ambitious of perpetuating myself."

"Love-making!—pooh!" repeats Sir Thomas, contemptuously; "we need have none of that rubbish; respect and esteem are a deal the best basis to go upon; that's what your mother and I began life with ——"

"And have continued undiminished up to the present day," says St. John, with a slight sneer. "Well" (yawning,) "if you can find, amongst the wide range of your acquaintance, any young lady who is willing to respect and esteem me—which is not likely—or to respect and esteem Felton—which is more probable, and, after all, comes to much the same in the end—she may have the felicity of being your daughter-in-law, for all I shall do to

hinder it: anything for a quiet life."

Sir Thomas turns his bright little fierce eyes sharply upon his offspring, prepared, at a moment's notice, to precipitate himself into one of his blustering, sputtering, God damning rages if he detect the slightest sign of mirth or derision on the young man's face. But none such is to be found; his downcast eyes are fixed with lazy interest upon his own substantial legs, stretched in black-and-crimson-ribbed stockings, straight before him. The ire of his parent's gaze is mitigated. "If you are in earnest," he says, surlily, "and not making a jest of this, as you mostly do of every serious subject, why—why—there's no use in going far afield for what one has ready to one's hand."

"Where?" asks St. John, thoroughly mystified by the Delphic obscurity of his papa's remark, looking vaguely round the room, out on the terrace, at the laughing, tumbling fountain, at the garden roller.

"Where?" repeats Sir Thomas, rather

irritated at his son's obtuseness. "Why, here! not five yards off! in this very house!" Then, seeing him still look puzzled: "God bless my soul, sir! where are your wits to-day? How can you do better than Conny? That bit of land of hers down at Four Oaks dovetails into ours as neatly as possible; it seems as if it were intended by Providence," ends Sir Thomas, piously.

St. John gives a long low whistle. "Conny!" he repeats, in unfeigned surprise. "I should as soon have thought of marrying my mother. Why, we have been like brother and sister all our lives."

"Fiddlesticks!" says Sir Thomas, gruffly. "She is no more your sister than I am. When I was young, if people were born brothers and sisters they called themselves so, and if they were not they did not. I hate your adopted brother and sister and father and motherhoods."

"Conny!" ejaculates St. John, again, reflectively.

The idea is thoroughly new, certainly, but it does not altogether displease him.

He is thinking of her approvingly, as the one woman whom, above all others, it would be impossible for him to love. After all, it is not a wife for him that is required; God knows, he has no desire for such an appendage; it is a mother for the heir to Felton that is wanted; and for that purpose she will do as well as another —better than most, indeed, being statelier, fairer, of better growth. If she can transmit to her progeny her own straight features, instead of Sir Thomas's bottle nose, or St. John's long nondescript one, so much the better for them.

"Well?" says Sir Thomas, impatiently, strutting up and down, with his hands under his green-coat tails.

"If she have no objection, neither have I; 'one woman is as good as another, if not better,' as the Irishman said," answers the young man, indifferently. "Well, Sir Thomas," rising and looking excessively

bored, "I suppose I may go now, mayn't I? I promised Bellew to go down to the kennels with him, and as it is past twelve o'clock, I'm afraid my bliss cannot well be consummated to-day."

He wants an heir, and she wants diamonds, and so the bargain is struck.

"She is good to look at, and she does not pretend to care two straws about me—both causes for special thankfulness," he says to himself, with a sort of sardonic philosophy, after his decisive interview with his betrothed. "'On this day two years I married: Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth.' Will Byron's summary of wedded felicity be mine also? Probably. I suppose one may think oneself tolerably lucky nowadays if one steer clear of Sir James Wilde, and if one's children do not bear a very striking resemblance to one's neighbour."

> "And I know he's Mary's cousin;
> For my firstborn son and heir
> Much resembles that young guardsman,
> With the selfsame curly hair."

Meanwhile Esther's little holiday is succeeded by no others; it remains one green oasis, with well and palm-trees, among long stretches of shifting, blinding, desert sand. Mr. Linley, indeed, has been to call, and has been rewarded for his attention by a three-quarters-of-an-hour *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Blessington. Esther is aware of his presence; is visited, indeed, by a small and contemptible desire to go down and chat with the young fellow; feels a weak craving for the touch of a friendly hand, for the greeting of admiring eyes and courteous words. But, being dimly conscious that the small acquaintance she has already had with him has made Gerard conceive an even worse opinion of her than he had before nourished, she restrains herself, in her great desire to prove to him that she is not the insatiable greedy coquette he falsely thinks her; and stays upstairs in the cold, in her great bare barrack, curled up on the broad paintless window-seat, and

vainly trying to read "Pamela"—the hairbreadth escapes from RUIN (in big letters), in the shape of a handsome and generous master, of that most austerely virtuous and priggish of waiting-maids being one of the newest works of fiction in the Blessington library.

And St. John hears of Linley's visit, and does not hear of Esther's little self-abnegation; and, too proud to ask any questions about the matter, pictures to himself soft *œillades*, challenging smiles, hand-pressures, under the purblind eyes of the old lady, and, so picturing, eats his heart out with a dumb gnawing jealousy.

One evening, in one of her late lonely saunters (Miss Blessington never accompanies her on her walks), Esther has strayed outside the park-paling into the road, lured by the splendour of a great holly-bush, all afire with thousand clustered berries, amid the dark glister of varnished leaves. Now, although having well understood (as

"Johnny and his sister Jane
While walking down a shady lane,"

unfortunately for themselves, did not) that

"Fruit in lanes is seldom good,"

Esther has coveted those berries. Fond of bright colours as a child or a savage, she has been wrestling obstinately with the stout tough stems, and has come off ultimately victor, with only one very considerable scratch, and several lesser ones on each bare hand. This spoil, robbed from niggard winter, will make the old rat palace at home so bravely, warmly gay. As she strolls slowly along, considering her treasures, the sound of a trotting horse on the road behind her reaches her ears. She turns, and sees a glimmer of scarlet flashing through the misty light. Is it St. John coming back from hunting? If St. John have a figure light and spare as a jockey's, have a large red moustache, and a small questioning

retroussé face, this is he; if he have not, this is not he.

"How de-do, Miss Craven?" says Linley, throwing himself off his horse, and coming towards her with ready right hand heartily outstretched. "Could not imagine who you were. I thought, perhaps, you were the spirit of a departed Blessington, and as I am rather nervous, and frightened out of my wits at ghosts, I had half a mind to turn and flee."

"Only curiosity got the better of fear," she says, smiling up at him, or rather down on him, through the steaming January evening; "you thought I might prove human, after all?"

"Why did not you come and see me the other day when I came to call upon you?" he asks, walking along beside her; "I believe you were at home all the time." In his heart he does not in the least believe it.

She does not answer; but, without thinking of what she is doing, picks off

the berries, the procuring of which had cost her so many wounds, and strews them along the road.

"Were you *really* at home?" he repeats, a misgiving as to such having been the case crossing his mind, and giving his vanity a slight prick.

"Yes, I was."

"And knew I was there all the time?"

"Yes."

"A prey to Mrs. Blessington——?"

"Yes."

"And never came to my rescue?"

"Did you expect the butler and housekeeper to come and entertain you?" she asks, a little bitterly. "Have you forgotten what I told you the other day—that I am Mrs. Blessington's *valet?* I have as little concern with her visitors as the kitchen-maids have."

"But I was not *her* visitor," objects the young fellow, stoutly—"at least" (laughing) "I *was*, but Heaven knows I did not mean to be! However, 'God

tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' and I obtained a great deal of information gratis upon a subject on which I really never had reflected as seriously as, it appears, I ought to have done——"

"Draughts and sandbags! I know what you are going to say," interrupts Esther, breaking into a childish light-hearted laugh. "We do hear a great deal about them; but I don't mind now; I'm used to it. I fall into a sort of waking trance when the subject is first broached, and say 'Yes' and 'No,' and 'H'm' and 'Oh,' at stated intervals; it does just as well as listening all through."

Linley laughs too. He is always glad of an excuse for laughing. Life has been to him as yet only laughable or smileable.

"Not a bad plan," he says, commendingly; "but, really now, I flattered myself I struck out one or two very original thoughts on the subject of sash-windows; I said several rather brilliant things, only she did not seem to see them. I hoped

she would have found my conversation so improving that she would have asked me to come again; but she did not do anything of the kind."

"They never ask anybody to Blessington," says Esther, feeling the string of her tongue loosed, and experiencing, despite herself, great enjoyment in having some one to chatter to, at whom it is not necessary to bawl, and who does not answer her monosyllabically with *fade* chilly smiles. "They are too old to care for society; like Barzillai the Gileadite, they cannot hear any more 'the voice of singing men and singing women.' They have the clergyman and his wife to dine on Christmas Day, and there their gaiety for the year begins and ends."

"And yours too?"

"And mine too. But I don't wish for gaiety," she answers, gravely, with an involuntary glance at her crape, which has grown very brown, and rusty, and shabby genteel.

"It must be an awful fate being shut up with those two old mummies," says Linley, compassionately, his pity for Miss Craven made vivid by his personal recollections of Mrs. Blessington's conversational power. "I had rather live in a lighthouse, or sweep a crossing, by long odds."

"So would I," she answers, drily, "if any one would set on foot a subscription to buy me a broom."

"You have Miss Blessington now as a companion, at all events," rejoins he, glad to fix on any bright spot in his poor new acquaintance's mud-coloured life.

"Yes; she is pleasant to look at."

"And to talk to?"

"She never talks."

"And Gerard? He is not particularly pleasant to look at, certainly——."

"Not particularly," she assents; feeling a hot glow steal all over her, as at an insult to herself.

"But when he is not in one of his sulks, as he was the other day—do you remem-

ber?—he is not a bad fellow, as fellows go."

"Isn't he?"

He looks at her with surprise. "Why, surely, living in the same house with him, you ought to know him, at least as well as I do?"

"I never speak to him, and he never speaks to me," she answers, shortly.

Linley bursts out laughing. "Good heavens! what a horrible picture you draw! You remind one of Mr. Watts's prètty little hymn—

> "'Where'er I take my walks abroad
> How many poor I see!
> And as I never speaks to them
> They never speak to me.'"

Esther laughs; but anyone listening might have heard a melancholy ring in her merriment.

"Does *nobody* speak to *anybody* then at Blessington?" asks the young man, aghast at the state of things as revealed by his companion's answers.

"Mr. Blessington roars at Mrs. Blessington, and Mrs. Blessington roars at Mr. Blessington, and I roar at them both."

"And the other two—do not they speak?"

"We are, none of us, much addicted to conversation," she answers, grimly; "but, *en revanche*, what we do say we say very loud."

"Are you *all* deaf, then?"

"No; but when one lives with deaf people, one gets into the habit of thinking that the whole world is hard of hearing; one bawls at everyone."

"What an exhausting process!" he says, with a shrug; "takes a great deal out of you, doesn't it?"

"A good deal; lately, I have generally ended the day without any voice at all. I don't mind making short remarks at the top of my voice, but shouting out six columns of the *Times*, as is daily my pleasing task, is rather fatiguing."

"How inhuman of them to allow you!"

he cries, indignantly, looking at the slender fragile figure, at the childish face—so appealing, so touching in its utter paleness, now that he sees it without the temporary rose-flush of excitement.

"Not at all," she answers, simply; "they pay me for it."

"It would require very high pay to indemnify any one for the sacrifice of the best years of their lives to those two old fossils; I thought I was entitled to something considerable for standing the old woman for three-quarters of an hour the other day without uttering a groan," answers the young man, more seriously than he generally takes the trouble of saying anything.

"My pay is fifty pounds a year," she answers, frankly, "if you call that high."

Fifty pounds! It would not find him in cigars. He has thrown away five times that sum, before now, at lansquenet at one sitting.

Involuntarily his thoughts glance back

over his own life—the luxurious sybarite life in which, hitherto, the heaviest misfortunes have been a too-prolonged frost, a disease among the grouse, the coming in second at a steeplechase, or the pressure of a heavy helmet on his forehead when on duty on a hot summer afternoon. Involuntarily, he compares this life of his with the existence of the slight frail child beside him: but the comparison is disagreeable, and so he stifles it, as he always stifles, on principle, every painful thought, as a sin against his religion of ease.

"Fifty pounds!—what a pittance!" he ejaculates.

"Do you think so?" she answers, surprised. "I think it is a good deal. Considering that they find me in food and lodging, and that I do for them only what any charity-school boy could do nearly as well, it is surely enough."

Her companion differs widely in opinion from her, but

"When ignorance is bliss
'Tis folly to be wise;"

and reflecting that it is fortunate that she is satisfied, on whatever insufficient grounds her satisfaction rests, he drops the subject, and continues his catechism on a different head.

"Have you no amusements of any kind —*none?*"

"Oh dear, yes! We drive into Shelford every day in a close carriage, with all the windows up."

"Terrific! And what do you do when you get there?"

"We come back again."

"And have you no visitors? Does no one ever come to call?"

"Yes; you came the other day."

"And am I a solitary instance of would-be sociability?"

"Not quite. Mr. Blessington gets into a panic about himself, sometimes, and thinks that he is drawing near his latter end; and he bids us all good-bye; and *he*

cries, and *we* cry, and then Mr. Brand, the doctor, comes and reassures us."

"I had no idea that there was anything the matter with the old gentleman."

"No more there is. He has no more idea of dying *really* than you have: less, probably. You may break your neck out hunting, and he cannot well break his out of his armchair. When a person has got into such a confirmed habit of living as he has," she concludes, drily, "they find it extremely difficult to break themselves of it."

He smiles.

"After all," she continues, thoughtfully, "since it is wear-and-tear of mind, brain and heart-work, that drives people to the churchyard, I don't see any reason why mere sleeping and eating machines should not go on for ever."

It would be impossible to imagine a more innocent dialogue than the foregoing, would not it? But the interlocutors have involuntarily fallen into a

very gentle saunter, as two people that, finding each other's society agreeable, are in no haste to part. With his horse's bridle carelessly thrown over his arm, a small muddy scarlet gentleman strolls along with his face turned with interest towards his companion, who is chattering away to him freely and readily—not as having any particular partiality for him, but as being something young, friendly, compassionate.

This is the picture—invested by twilight with an air of mystery that it would not have worn in daylight—that salutes the eyes of a second and larger scarlet gentleman, splashing home through the puddles on a tired horse. As he passes them, Gerard (for it is he) pulls up his horse into a walk, for he would not have the incivility to cover any woman with dirt, even though the woman in question be a vile greedy coquette, to whose insatiable vanity all men are meat. Then, raising his hat stiffly, he rides on without speak-

ing. As he trots homeward through the dusk, the thought flashes into his writhing heart: "It was an assignation! She arranged it with him on the day he came to call. Damnable flirt! Is not she satisfied with *two* ruined lives? Is she fool enough to think that Linley will marry her? A nice time of night for a respectable young woman to be out walking with a man she has only seen twice in her life! And I heard her tell Mrs. Blessington the other day that she never went outside the park-gates! Liar! What man was ever deep enough to be up to a woman's tricks? She'll go to the dogs, as sure as fate, if she is left to herself! Pshaw! I daresay she knows the way there already. She is *so* young; shall I warn her? Shall I speak to her? Not I. Thank God, it is no business of mine!"

"Gerard!" says Linley, as, having passed them, he strikes into a brisk trot—"looking as if he were going to his own funeral, and just about to join the *cortège.*

Certainly being in love don't improve him; he is not half the fellow he was last season."

But Esther, in the moment of his passing them, had caught a glimpse of the eager white anger of his face, and she hardly hears. "I'm afraid Mr. Gerard thought it odd my being out so late," she says, trembling with recollected fear of those altered, wrathful eyes.

"Well, and if he did?" cries Linley, impatiently.

"It *is* very late," she says, looking round into the dusk; "it must be, by the light. I never noticed how dark it has grown since you overtook me."

"It is no darker than it was before Gerard passed us," he answers, rather nettled.

"No, but—"

"Why, how scared you look!" he interrupts her. "You don't mean to say you are *afraid* of him?" (incredulously.) "If I were you, I don't think I should pay

much deference to the opinion of a person who, as you say, never has the civility even to speak to you."

She is silent.

"It is the authority of his eye that awes you, I suppose?" says the young man, vexed and sneering:—

"'An eye like Mars', to threaten and command.'

"*Threaten!* Yes—I can testify to that!"

Hearing his words, Esther recovers her self-possession, and speaks with some dignity: "You are quite wrong. Mr. Gerard's opinion has no influence whatever on my sayings or doings; it would be very ridiculous if it had. It was merely that his look of surprise reminded me of what I ought to have recollected without reminding, that I *should* have been home an hour ago."

"Wanted again, I suppose?" says the young man, with the air of an aggrieved person. "I wish you were not in quite

such request; you are always being wanted."

"There is a stile close here," says Esther, evidently in a hurry to be off; "if I cross it, and make a short-cut across the park, I shall be home twenty minutes sooner than if I went by the road. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he says, reluctantly. "I'm not a bloodthirsty fellow generally, but I wish that Gerard had broken his neck over that bullfinch that he came to grief over to-day, before he had come poking his ugly nose here, where nobody wanted him; at least I did not, and, to judge by your face, neither did you. Well! when are we to meet again, I wonder?"

"Never!—some time or other—soon!" answers Esther, hastily and contradictorily, running up the gamut of adverbs in search of the one most likely to obtain her release. Having gained that object, she jumps over the stile, and disappears into a sea of mist.

Meanwhile St. John, having arrived at Blessington, and given up his horse to a groom, enters the house; but the confinement of roof and walls is insupportable to him. So he goes out again, and, walking up the avenue, stations himself at the gate. There, resting his arms on the topmost bar, he stands, straining his eyes down the road by which he expects to see Esther and her companion make their appearance.

"They will defer their parting to the last moment—that is of course," he says to himself, in his lonely pain. "Well," taking out his watch and minuting them, in order to drink the cup of his jealous misery to the dregs, "it is not more than a mile and a half from here to the place where I passed them; let us see how long a time they will manage to be in doing the distance."

He has not long to wait. Before five minutes are over he hears the sound of a horse's feet. "Linley must not see him

watching them," he thinks, with a sort of shame at himself, and so steps back into the shade of a great tree.

Linley rides by *alone*. His face is turned towards the house, in whose great black façade the lighted windows make oblong-shaped red glories; his eyes are trying to fix upon Esther's casement. Of course he hits upon the wrong one, and directs his sentimental gaze towards the apartment where, with wig off and teeth out, Mrs. Blessington, aided by her maid, is slowly moving through the stages of her dinner toilette.

"She must have taken the short-cut across the park," thinks Gerard, with a sense of unwilling relief. "Afraid of my telling tales of her escapade, I suppose."

He retraces his steps down the avenue, and, following a back road that skirts the kitchen-garden, reaches another gate that leads into the park, and there stands and waits again.

The short-cut has proved rather a long

one. Part of the park has been fenced off, to keep the deer and the Scotch cattle separate; a gate which she had reckoned upon finding open, she discovers to be padlocked, and has to make a long circuit round to another gate.

As she toils weary-footed through the wet grass, vague alarms assail him that watches for her. Can any evil have come to her in the darkness? Most improbably in that still safe park. After awhile, and when his reasonless fears are beginning to gather more strongly about his heart, he hears the sound as of some one running pantingly. Esther is not so good at running as she was in the old Glan-yr-Afon days. She has been flying along in hot haste, with a mixed fear of Scotch bulls and goblins in pursuit. As she approaches the gate, Gerard opens it for her. Seeing it swing open without any apparent cause, she gives a great nervous start; then, discovering the motive cause of the phenomenon, drops into a walk.

"It is rather late, Mr. Gerard. I'm afraid, isn't it so?" she asks, with some hesitation at this disobedience to his command of silence. And yet, surely, if he had meant not to speak to her, he would not have come thither.

Two speech-gifted human beings could hardly be expected to meet with less civility than two pigs, who would at least exchange a grunt.

He looks at his watch again. "It is ten minutes to six," he replies with punctilious politeness.

"Is it *really?* I had no idea how the time went," she says, apologetically, "until your look of—of—*surprise* reminded me."

The line of defence she has hit upon is unlucky.

"Really!" he answers, stiffly.

"I had not noticed how the light had gone, nor anything about the matter," she continues, innocently, floundering at every word into deeper disgrace.

"I daresay not," he replies, freezingly. She had addressed him, penitent and humble, willing to take a scolding in all submissiveness, but the chill brevity of his answers turns her meekness to gall.

"When one is in pleasant company," she remarks, with a rather hysterical laugh, "one forgets the flight of time."

"Undoubtedly," replies Gerard, endeavouring to conceal his anger under an appearance of calmness, and unable to manage more than one word at a time.

"If one has not taken a vow of perpetual silence, it is a great relief to have a little conversation with a person who is neither *deaf* nor *dumb*," she says, emboldened by exasperation.

"An immense relief, no doubt," he answers, in deep displeasure. "And yet, if you will allow me," he continues, unable to resist the temptation to lecture her —"who am so much older than you, and can have no interest in the matter but your own advantage—to give an opinion, I

should recommend your choosing a fitter time of day for your meetings, even with so desirable and congenial a companion as Mr. Linley."

"Beggars must not be choosers," she answers, sulkily. "You seem to forget how very small a portion of the day I have at my own disposal."

He draws himself up to his full height, and a stern expression makes his lips thin. "I was right," he says internally; "it was no accident!" Then aloud: "I apologise, Miss Craven, for interfering in your affairs, in which, God knows, I have small concern. I only thought that, as you are so young, you might not be aware that *nocturnal* walks with a man of Linley's character are not advantageous to any woman's reputation."

"I know nothing about his character," retorts she, defiantly; "I daresay it is as good as other people's. All I know is, that he is very kind and civil to me, which is what nobody else is nowadays."

Then, to avoid the disgrace of seeming to court his compassion by tears, she darts from his side, and rushes to that harbour of refuge—her great bare sleeping-chamber.

CHAPTER IX.

TIME goes by. Since Joshua, God-bidden, commanded sun and moon to stand still, who has been able to stop it?

Gerard still remains at Blessington—remains, despite the six-o'clock dinners; despite the inarticulate and inharmonious mumblings with which old Blessington takes away the appetites of such as feast with him; despite the utter failure of his endeavours to draw from the mind of his betrothed any ideas but such as *Le Follet* and *Le Journal des Demoiselles* had just put into it. Latterly he has abandoned the attempt, has taken to reading the *Times*, *Field*, anything, in the evening, instead; has even, in his despair—modern works of fiction being, as I have before

observed, unknown at Blessington—waded through two chapters and a half of "Pamela," which Esther had inadvertently left on the table. Sometimes, to his own surprise, he catches himself wishing that his wedding-day were over. "When we are married, we need never speak to one another," he reflects. "Thank God, we shall not be so poor as to be obliged to keep together from economy; a dinner of herbs and hatred, or, worse still, indifference therewith, *would* be hard to digest; she may go her way, and I mine. I will get up a great stock of beads, and looking-glasses, and red calico, and make an expedition to Central Africa; learn some euphonious African tongue, all made up of Ms and Ns; and carefully abstain from engaging in arguments upon the immortality of the soul with intelligent natives."

Now and again conscience's voice thunders at him in the recesses of his soul: "You are paltering with temptation.

Arise!—flee!—begone!" But he, strong in the innocence of his acts and words, replies doughtily: "Temptation is there none for me here. The occupations of my life are such as they would be at home; I am struggling to know and like better her with whom my life is to be passed. As to that other woman, I see her rarely, speak to her never, look at her as seldom as it is possible to me."

And, in the meantime, that other woman droops like an unwatered flower, day by day. When the mainspring of a watch is broken, must it not stop? If hope, the mainspring of life, be broken, must not life stop—not all at once, as the watch does, but by gentle yet sure degrees? A slow fire burns in the child's veins; before this man had come, she had peace—a sad stagnant peace, indeed, but still peace. *Now* she lives in a state of perpetual concealed excitement. True, they meet but rarely, speak to each other never; but the same roof covers them both. From

her outlook in the China Gallery, she can watch his going forth in the morning, his coming back at evening. At breakfast and dinner he sits opposite to her; she can study his face, with stealthy care, lest she may be observed, while he drives heavily through slow trite talk with her that fills the place in his life that, for a golden day, from one sundown to another, was Esther's. Sometimes they meet upon the stairs; her black dress lightly touches him, as they pass one another dumbly. At night she lies awake, waiting to catch the sound of his footfall in the gallery past her door; has to wait long hours often; for he, unknowing that any one takes note of his vigils, sits in the smoking-room far into the small hours, puffing out of his well-coloured meerschaum great volumes of smoke—wishing, not seldom, I think, that he could puff away Constance, his beloved, into smoke volumes and thin air.

Fed by no kindly words, nourished only

upon neglect and cold looks. Esther's love for Gerard yet strikes out great roots downwards—shoots forth strong branches upwards. A tree of far statelier growth it stands than in the days when the soft gales and gentle streams of answering love fanned and watered it. Who cares for what they can have? Who cries for the moon? It is the intermediate something — the something that lies just a handbreadth beyond the utmost stretch of our most painfully-strained arms, that we eat out our hearts in longing for.

Esther never goes beyond the park palings now, deterred by the fear of being waylaid by Linley. She need not have been alarmed. As long as she came naturally in his way, he was delighted to see her: as we stoop and pick gladly the fruit that drops off the tree at our feet. He had even, on a day when the frost forbade hunting, and when he had got tired of skating, taken the unwonted trouble of riding over to Blessington, to

warm himself at the fire of those great black eyes, that have still for him the charm of novelty upon them; but women, many and fair, came too readily to his hand to make him very keen in the chase of any one individual woman. In former generations men used to be the pursuers, women the pursued. In this generation we, who have set right most things, have set right this also. *Now*, the hares pursue the harriers, the foxes the hounds, and the doves swoop upon the falcons.

During these latter evenings Mr. Blessington has been very alert and wakeful—has insisted on being read to from tea to bed time—a liberal hour. But, however hoarse and voiceless the young reader may be, Gerard never now comes to the rescue, never interferes, though the frequent teasing cough of the "damnable flirt" goes through his heart like a sword. With steady certainty, through frost and thaw, rain and shine, through all the alternations of an English winter, the young girl's

health declines. To all but herself is this fact evident, and she, unaccustomed to illness—never having seen the signs of premature decay in others—thinks it is but a little weariness, a little languor, a nothing. It will pass when the swooned world revives into spring and the buttercups come.

Sunday is here again, the initial letter in the week's alphabet:

> "The Sundays of man's life,
> Threaded together on Time's string,
> Make bracelets to adorn the wife
> Of the eternal glorious King."

Ah me! the languid, yawning Sundays of most of us will make but sorry bracelets for any one, methinks. Sunday—the day on which the Shelford shopboys and shopgirls walk about gloriously appareled, arm-in-arm, man and maid, filling their lungs with country air,—day on which the gentlefolks, such as are men of them, debarred from horse and hound and cue, smoke a cigar or two more than usual over

the instructive pages of Messieurs De Kock, Sue, Balzac, &c.; while such as are women, being for the most part piously disposed, hold "Goulburn's Thoughts on Personal Religion," or Hannay's "Last Day of Our Lord's Passion," open on their velvet laps, and kill a reputation between each paragraph.

On this especial Sunday Esther has risen, feeling feebler, more nerveless than usual. Something in the influence of the weather—soft, sodden, sunless—weighs upon her with untold oppression. She would fain not go to church, remain at home, and lie on her bed; but this cannot be. Foremost in importance, in indispensability, among her duties are these Sunday ones. If the weather be tolerable, Mr. Blessington is always scrupulously punctual in attending Divine worship. Leaning on his valet's arm, he totters up the church, in his old tail-coat, tightly buttoned over his sunken chest, and, arrived at the Blessington pew, is deposited

in a little nook thereof, partitioned (in some quirk of his, while he could yet see) from the rest. In this nook there is room for two people—to wit, for Mr. Blessington, and for the happy person who is to guide his devotions. And to conduct Mr. Blessington's prayers and praises is, I assure you, no sinecure. Almost entirely deaf, almost entirely blind, he is yet resolute to take a part in the services by no means less prominent than the clerk's. It is, therefore, his attendant's duty to shout the responses in his ear, in order to give him some clue to the portion of the ritual which has been arrived at; and to check him with elbowings and nudgings, when his aberrations from the right path become so flagrantly noticeable as to distract the attention of the other worshippers. But too often, however, the attempts at repression on the part of the acolyte are so much labour lost. In the region of darkness and silence in which his infirmities have placed him, the old man

frequently becomes impatient of the slow progress of the service as notified to him by the roars of his companion. Not seldom he proclaims, in a voice distinctly audible throughout the building, the point at which, according to his reckoning, priest and people should have arrived. "And with thy spirit," cries the squire, with unction in his deep tremulous bass, while the sleek young rector's gentle "The Lord be with you" does not follow till five minutes later. In the Creed there is but one course to pursue: to start him, if possible, fair—happy, indeed, if he does not insist on turning to the altar somewhere towards the close of the second lesson or beginning of the Jubilate,—to start him fair, I say, and then in despair, give him his head. Fervently, loudly, rapidly, he announces his belief in the articles of the Christian faith, while parson, clerk, and congregation toil after him in vain. Occasionally — especially at such portions of the service as refer to our need

of forgiveness, our sinfulness, our mortality,—he breaks out into senile tears; too deaf to hear his own penitent sobs, he has no idea of the loudness with which they reverberate through the church. Strangers, hearing, perk their heads up above their pews, and then fling them down again on their pocket-handkerchiefs convulsed with inextinguishable laughter; but the greater part of the assemblage are used to these spasms of grotesque devotion—it is only "t'oud squoire."

Esther always draws a long breath of relief when

> "Lord, have mercy upon us!
> Christ, have mercy upon us!
> Lord, have mercy upon us!"

has been safely tided over without any unusually noisy burst of lamentation.

On the Sunday I speak of "t'oud squoire's" prayers were more unruly than usual. Whether it was that Esther's weakened voice was unable to guide them

into the right channel, or to whatever other cause assignable, certain it is that his vagaries were more painfully evident—ludicrously to the congregation, distressingly to his family—than on any former Sunday within the memory of man. Many heads turn towards the Blessington pew; even the rector—meekest among M.A.s—looks now and again with gentle reproach at the old man, who is, with such aggressive loudness, usurping his office of leading the devotions of his flock. A proud woman is Esther Craven when the Liturgy comes to a close. In the sermon there are, thank God, no responses for the congregation to make; it is not even customary to cry, "Hear, hear!" "Hallelujah!" "More power to you!" at intervals. In the sermon, therefore, the old gentleman composes himself to sleep, and there is peace.

The Blessington pulpit is to-day occupied by a stranger—a Boanerges, or Son of Thunder, in the shape of a muscular,

half-educated, fluent Irishman—a divine who would fain *flog* his hearers to heaven, show them the way upwards by the light of hell's flambeaux—one of that too numerous class who revel in disgusting descriptions, and similes drawn from our mortality. It is impossible to help listening to him, and difficult to help being sick. Esther listens, trembling, while he descants with minute relish on "the worm that never dies." The worm that never dies! Surely, a terrible picture enough, in its simple bareness, without enlargement thereupon! With imagination rendered more vivid, and reason weakened by sickness, the unhappy girl pictures that worm gnawing at her brother's heart—gnawing, crawling, torturing eternally. She covers her face with her hands; it is too horrible! A sort of sick feeling comes over her—a giddy faintness. If she can but reach the open air! She rises unsteadily, opens the pew-door, and walks as in a mist down the aisle, between the

two rows of questioning faces, and so out. As she passes through the church-door she staggers slightly, and catches at the wall for support. Gerard, watching her anxiously, sees her unsteady gait, and the involuntary gesture of reaching out for some stay for her tottering figure. Instantly, without giving thought to the light in which his beloved may regard his proceeding, he, rising, quickly follows the young girl. She has just managed to reach a flat tombstone, and there sits, with her face turned thirstily westwards, whence a small soft wind blows fitfully.

"You are ill," he says, bending solicitously over her, and laying aside in that compassionate moment the armour of his coldness.

She does not answer for awhile; then, drawing a long breath, and trying to smile: "The church was so close," she says, sighingly; "and that smell of escaped gas always makes me feel faint, and — and" (with a shudder)—"that dreadful

man—with his metaphors all taken from the charnelhouse!"

"I wish he were there himself, with all my heart," answers Gerard, devoutly; "he might there frame metaphors to his taste at his leisure."

"And it is so terrible to think that it is all *true*, isn't it?" she says, fixing her great awestruck eyes upon his face, as if trying to find comfort and reassurance there; "that the reality exceeds even his revolting word-painting; that we *shall* be *loathsome*, all of us!—you and I and everybody—young and old, beautiful and ugly! How *could* God be so cruel as to let us know it beforehand?"

"Knowing it beforehand is better than knowing it at the time, which, at least, we are spared," replies St. John, composedly.

"But are we?" she cries, eagerly: "that is the question! Latterly I have been beset by a fearful idea that death is but a long catalepsy. In a catalepsy, you

know, a person seems utterly without consciousness or volition; breath is suspended, and all the vital functions; and yet he feels and sees and hears more acutely than when in strong health. Why may not death, too, be a catalepsy?"

"Absurd!" he says. "My poor child, it is thoughts like these, gone wild, that fill madhouses. According to your theory, at what point of time does your catalepsy end? When we are dissolved into minutest particles of dust does each atom still feel and suffer?"

"My theory, as you call it, will not hold water, I know," she answers gravely, "but it does not haunt me any the less. There are times when one cannot reason —one can only *fear*."

"You should not give way to these morbid fancies," he says, chidingly; "they are making you ill."

"Am I ill, do you think? Do I look ill?" she asks, with startled eagerness.

The havoc worked in face and figure by

the last few months is too directly under his eyes for him to answer anything but truthfully, "Very ill."

"You don't think I'm going to *die?*" she says, lowering her voice, and laying her hand on his arm, while her great feverish eyes burn into his very soul. "People are not any the more likely to die for being thin and weak, are they? Creaky doors hang the longest."

"Die!—God forbid!" he replies, trying to speak lightly. "Let us banish death from our talk. I suppose it is this place of tombs that has made him take such a leading part in it. Come, you are not at all fit to go back into church, and I am not anxious to hear the tail-end of that wormy discourse. The smell of brimstone is quite strong enough in my nostrils already. Let us go home!"

So they return to the house, and he still shows no inclination to leave her. He draws a chair for her near an open window, and stands with his hand resting

on the back. It is almost like the old times—the old times that he thinks of,

> "As dead men of good days,
> Ere the wrong side of death was theirs, when God
> Was friends with them."

Something in the recollection of those days make soft his voice, which is not wont to be soft. "You are not fit for this life," he says, stooping down his face towards her small wan one. "It requires a tough seasoned woman, in middle life. Tell me why you have undertaken it? Why are you not—not married?"

She turns away, crimsoning painfully. "Because no one has asked me, I suppose," she answers, trying to speak banteringly.

"But you were engaged when—when we parted?"

"Yes."

"And you are not now?"

With ungovernable, unaccountable impatience, he awaits the slow brief answer.

"No."

"Had he then—h'm! h'm!—*discovered* anything?" Gerard asks, finding some difficulty in framing the question politely.

She fires up quickly. "*Discovered* anything!" she repeats, indignantly. "Do you think it is impossible for me to be honest even *once* in my life? I told him myself."

"*You* broke it off, then?"

"No, I didn't."

"*He* did?"

"Yes."

"Poor fellow! he had good cause to be angry," says St. John; the old bitterness surging back upon him, as he reflects on the cowardly duplicity that had made waste two honest lives.

"But he was *not* angry," she cries, eagerly: "he was grieved—oh, *so* grieved! Shall I ever forgive myself when I think of how he looked when I told him?" (her eyes gazing out abstractedly at the "Rape of the Sabines," as her thoughts fly back to that quarried nook on the bleak

autumnal hillside, where she had broken a brave man's heart). "But he was not angry. Oh, no! he never thought of himself! he thought only about me! Ah! *that was* love!"

"He would not marry you, however?" says St. John, exasperated at these laudations, which he imagines levelled as reproaches against himself.

"No," she answered quietly, "you are right; he would not marry me, though I begged him. But that was for my sake, too—not his own; he told me that he could not make me happy, for that I did not love him. He was wrong, though. I did love him—I love him now. If I did not love the one friend I have in all this great empty world, what should I be made of?" she concludes, while the tears come into her eyes.

"You have a great capacity for loving," says St. John, who, though not usually an ungenerous fellow, is maddened by the expressions of affection, the tears and re-

gretful looks bestowed upon his rival. "I envy, though I despair of emulating you."

"Men have but *one* way of loving," she answers, gently; "women have several. I love him as the one completely unselfish being I ever met. I agree with you, that the way of loving you mean comes but once in a lifetime."

At her words, and the fidelity to himself which they so innocently imply, a fierce bright joy upleaps in his heart—a joy that clamours for utterance in violent fond words, in the wild closeness of forbidden embraces; but honour, that strong gaoler that keeps so many under lock and key, keeps him too.

"For Love himself took part against himself
To warn us off; and Duty, loved of love—
Oh! this world's curse, beloved but hated—came,
Like death, betwixt thy dear embrace and mine,
And crying, 'Who is this? Behold thy bride!'
She push'd me from thee."

He only holds out his hand to her. "Esther, let us be friends. I am tired of

this silence and estrangement; let there be peace between us!"

"I have always wished for it," she answers meekly, laying her little trembling hand in his—"you know I have; but let us be at peace *apart*, and not *together;* that will be better. How long," she asks, impulsively, lifting quivering red lips and dew-soft eyes to his—"how long—how much longer—do you mean to stay here?"

"Why do you ask?" he says, in a troubled voice, hurt pride and hot passion struggling together. "Surely in this great wide house there is room for you and me; I am not much in your way, surely?"

"You are," she answers, feverishly—"you are in my way; you would be, in the widest house that ever was built. Every day I long more and more to be a great way off from you. I think I could breathe better if I were."

He does not answer: leaning still over her in a dumb agonised yearning, that—

with the chains of another still dragging about him—may not be outspoken.

"That day we met upon the stairs," she continues, eyes and cheeks aflame and lustrous with the consuming fire within her, "you promised me you would avail yourself of the first opportunity to leave this place; a month or more is gone since then. Surely the most exacting mistress could spare you for awhile now? Why have you broken your word, then? Why are you here?"

He is silent for a few moments, questioning his own soul—questioning that conscience whose monitions he has hitherto so stoutly resisted. Then he speaks, a flush of shame making red his bronzed cheek: "Because I have been dishonest to myself and to you. This place has had an attraction for me which I see now it would not have had had *she* only been here. I linger about it as a man lingers about the churchyard where his one hope lies buried."

"Don't linger any longer, then," she cries, passionately, taking his hand between both her's; "don't be dishonest any more! Tell *yourself* the truth, if you tell no one else, and go *at once*, before it is too late; for if you won't, *I* must!"

She is weeping freely as she speaks; her tears drop hot and slow, one after another, upon his hand.

He flings himself on his knees beside her, his mastery over himself reeling in the strong rush of long-pent passion. "You tell me to go," he says, in a voice choked and altered with emotion, "and in the very act of telling me you cry. Which am I to believe, your words or your tears?"

"My words," she answers, trying to speak collectedly, and by gaining calmness herself to bring it back to him. "I have been dishonourable once—you know it; don't let me have the remorse of thinking that I made an honourable man palter with temptation — made him sully his

honour for me. If *I* am the inducement that keeps you here, *go; for my sake, go!* I say it a hundred times; promise me you will go—*soon, this week.* Let me hear you swear it; you will not break your oath, I know!"

He is silent; hesitating to take that step of irrevocable banishment—banishment from the woman that he cast away in righteous wrath, and in whose frail life his own now seems to be bound up.

"Swear!" she says again, earnestly, with a resolute look in her soft face. "I beg it of you as a favour; for if you won't, though my only chance of daily bread lies here, I must go to-night."

The determination in her voice recalls him to his senses. "I will not drive you to such extremities," he says, coldly. "Give me only till to-morrow morning—twenty-four hours cannot make much difference to you, and a man going to be hanged likes to have a little respite—give

me till to-morrow, and I will swear whatever you wish."

"That is right," she answers, trying to smile through her tears "Some day you will thank me; you will say, 'She was a bad girl, but she did me one good turn!'"

The people are flocking out of church; the squire, in a low pony-chaise, driven by a groom as old and toothless as himself, and drawn by a pony (considering the comparative ages of horses and men) also nearly as old, is bowling gently up the drive.

"I must go," Esther says, rising hastily; "Mrs. Blessington hates red eyes as she hates a black dress, and for the same reason!"

CHAPTER X.

At Blessington no one goes to church twice. It is the bounden duty of every Christian man, woman, and child to go to church in the morning; it is the duty of only the clergyman, the school-children, and the organist to go to church in the afternoon. The old people sleep side by side in the blaze of the saloon-fire; being, both of them, happily deaf, they are undisturbed by each other's grunts and snores.

Since the beginning of St. John's visit, the north drawing-room has been made over to him and his betrothed to be affectionate in, so that they may enjoy, uninterrupted, those fits of affection to which all engaged people are supposed, and sometimes unjustly supposed,

to be liable. Whether they have reached the requisite pitch of warmth on the afternoon I speak of is, to say the least, doubtful; but, all the same, in the north drawing-room they are. Constance leans back in an armchair, rather listless. She is fond of work, and it is not right to work on Sunday: her feet repose on a foot-stool before her—her eyes are fixed upon them: she is thinking profoundly whether steel buckles a size smaller than the ones she is at present wearing would not be more becoming to the feet. St. John sits by the table; his left hand supports his head; his right scribbles idly, on a bit of paper, horses taking impossible fences, prize pigs, ballet-girls, little skeleton men squaring up at one another. He, too, is thinking—but not of shoe-buckles. He has got something to say to Miss Blessington—something unpleasant, unpolite; and he cannot, for the life of him, imagine how to begin to say it. Chance favours him. Miss Blessington, happening to look up,

catches her lover's eyes fixed, with an expression she had never before seen in them —not on herself, as she, for the first second imagines, but (as a second glance informs her) on some object outside the window. Her gaze follows his, and lights upon "nobody very particular—only poor Miss Craven!" who, with head rather bent is trudging by towards the garden. "How ill that girl looks!" she says, pettishly. "I really believe those sort of people take a pleasure in looking as sickly and woebegone as possible, in order to put one out of spirits."

The opening he has been looking for has come. "Constance," he says, bending his head, and speaking in a low voice, "what fatuity induced you not to send me word when you found that that girl was here?"

"You forbad me ever to mention her name to you," she answers, coldly; "and, to tell you the truth, I thought it was a good thing that you should see her. If

you had not met again, you might have carried a sentimental recollection of her throughout life, which you can hardly do now that you have seen with your own eyes how completely she has lost her beauty."

St. John lifts his head, and stares at her in blank astonishment. "Lost its beauty!" —that

> "Face that one would see,
> And then fall blind, and die, with sight of it,
> Held fast between the eyelids."

"Lost her beauty!" he repeats, in a sort of stupefaction.

"Well," she replies, languidly, "why do you repeat my words? You know I never admired her much. I never can admire those black women, but that is a matter of taste, of course. It is not matter of taste, however—it is matter of fact, that whatever good looks she once had are gone—*gone*."

Gerard smiles contemptuously. "I do believe that you women lose the sight of your eyes when you look at one another."

"What do you mean?" she asks, with some animation. "Is it possible that you don't agree with me as to her being quite *passée?*"

"I think her, as I always thought her," he answers, steadily, the "loveliest woman I ever beheld; a little additional thinness or paleness does not affect her much. Hers is not mere skin beauty: as you say, tastes differ, and I like *those black women.*"

"That is a civil speech to make to me!" she answers, reddening—an insult to her appearance or her clothes being the one weapon that has power to pierce the scales of her armour of proof.

St. John smiles again. "When we engaged to marry one another, did we also engage to think each other, the handsomest specimens of the human animal Providence ever framed?"

"It is, at least, not usual for a man to express an open preference for another woman to the girl to whom he is engaged."

"It is no question of *preference*," he an-

swers, quietly. "I had no thought of drawing any comparison between you and Miss Craven at the moment; I was not thinking of you."

"You said she was *the* loveliest girl you had ever seen!" objects Constance, pouting.

"So I did—I do think her so," he rejoins, calmly. "If there is some defect in my eyes, hindering me from seeing things as they are, it is my misfortune, not my fault. Cannot you be content," he asks, banteringly, "with being the *next loveliest?*"

She turns away her head, too indignant to answer.

He changes his tone. "Constance," he says, gravely, "when I proposed to you, did not I tell you, honestly, what I could give you and what I could not? Love (odd as it may sound between engaged people), and the blind admiration that accompanies love, I had not got to offer you; this is true, is not it?"

"Perfectly true," she answers, resent-

fully; "and as I am not, nor ever was, one of those inflammable young ladies, who think that *burning*, and *consuming*, and *melting* are essential to married happiness, I did not much regret its absence. I have always been brought up to think," she continues, having recourse to the high moral tone, which is her last sure refuge, "that respect and esteem are the best basis for two people to go upon, and I think so still."

"But do you and I respect and esteem one another?" he asks, half-cynically, half-mournfully. "Is it possible that I can respect you, who, though you did not care, or affect to care, two straws about me personally—though you knew, at the time I asked you to marry me, that I was madly in love with another woman—were yet willing to give yourself to me, soul and body—to be bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, because I was a good *parti*, as the vile phrase goes? And as for me," he ends, in bitter self-contempt,

"what is there in all my idle wasted life, from beginning to end, that any one can respect or esteem?"

"Has this struck you now for the first time?" she asks, drily. "I am not aware of any change in our relative circumstances since our marriage was arranged; I suppose our feelings towards each other are much what they were then, when you were troubled with none of these scruples."

"And what *were* our feelings then?" he asks, bitterly; "what brought us together? Was not it that our properties dovetailed conveniently into one another, as Sir Thomas says—that it was advisable for both of us to marry some one—that we were of suitable age, and had no positive distaste for one another: was not this so?"

"I suppose so," she answers, sulkily.

"And yet," he continues, sternly, "although I had laid bare to you all my wretched story—although you were well aware that I was utterly without the safe-

guard of any love to yourself—you yet let me fall into this temptation—the cruelest I could have been exposed to—without a word of warning. Was this fair? Was this right?"

"Since you put me on my defence," she answers, with anger, "I must repeat to you what I said before, that it seemed to me the best method of curing you of your ill-placed fancy for Esther Craven—a fancy which she repaid with such disgraceful deceit and duplicity—was to let you see for yourself what a wreck she had become!"

"You meant well, perhaps," he rejoins, with a sigh that is more than half a groan; "but it was terribly mistaken—terribly ill-judged: it has done us both an irreparable injury."

"I am not aware that it has done me any injury whatever," she answers, coldly, mistaking his meaning.

"I was not alluding to you," he replies, curtly.

She makes no rejoinder, and he, rising,

begins to walk up and down the room with his hands in his pockets. He has made his meaning clear enough, surely, and yet she does not appear to see it. As she continues resolutely silent, he stops opposite to her, and speaks earnestly, and yet with some embarrassment, as one who knows that what he says will be unpleasing to his listener.

"Constance, I must tell you the truth, though I suppose it is hardly of the complexion of the pretty flattering truths or untruths that you have been used to all your life. But, at least, it is better that you should hear it now, than that we should tell it one another a year hence, with mutual useless recriminations; there is no use in disguising the fact that you and I do not feel towards each other as husband and wife should feel."

"Pshaw!" she says pettishly, turning her head aside; "we feel much the same as other people do, I daresay."

"If," he continues, very gravely, "mar-

riage were a temporary connection, that lasted a year—five years say—or that could be dissolved at pleasure, there might be no great harm in entering upon it with the sort of negative liking, the absence of repugnance for one another, which is all that we can boast; but since it is a bargain for all time, and that there is no getting out of it except by the gate of death or disgrace, I think we ought both to reflect on it more seriously than we have yet done before undertaking it."

"It is rather late in the day to say all this," retorts she, indignantly. "You have known me all my life; you must have been well aware that I never could enter into those highflown, romantic notions, which I have heard you yourself ridicule a hundred times. These objections should have occurred to you before you proposed to me, and not now, when we have been engaged two months, and when our marriage has been discussed as a settled thing by all our acquaintance."

"You are right," he answers, quietly. "They should have occurred to me before; but, in justice to myself, I must say that they would never have occurred to me: I should have remained in the same state of supine indifference to everything in which I came here, had not you yourself thrown me in the way of Esther Craven."

She sits upright in her chair; her pale handsome face paler, harder than usual, in her great anger. "The drift of this long tirade, when translated into plain English, is, I suppose, that you wish to marry Esther Craven instead of me?"

He is silent.

"Is it so?" she repeats, her voice raised several notes above its wonted low key.

"When I am engaged to one woman," he answers, slowly, reluctantly, yet steadily, "I hope I am not dishonourable enough, willingly, to harbour the thought of marriage with any other."

The Gerard diamonds flash before her

mind's eye: they are so big and numerous —necklace, aigrette, stomacher. The idea of seeing them gleam restless in Esther's hair, on Esther's fair neck, is insupportable to her. She will not release him, ardently as he wishes it; she will hold him by a strong chain that will not snap—his honour.

"I am glad to hear it," she answers, coldly. "In common fairness to me, you could hardly have entertained such an idea. It is a great disadvantage to a girl to be engaged, to have her engagement as widely known as mine has been, and then to have it broken off; people never think the same of her again."

He turns to the window, to hide his bitter disappointment. "Very well," he answers, calmly; "things will remain as they are, I suppose, then? I only thought it right to warn you how small a chance of happiness there is in a marriage so loveless as ours: for the rest, you must blame yourself."

CHAPTER XI.

Night's black sheet drawn off the other half of the world is thrown over us; the dark side of the lantern is turned towards us. Esther has fallen asleep, with almost a happy smile upon her soft, parted lips. She is forgiven; and is there any sweetness like the sweetness of being pardoned, having sinned? He no longer hates her! That was not hate that looked out of his quick, keen eyes to-day, as he leant over her while she sat, dizzy and faint, on that churchyard slab, or as he knelt in strong emotion at her knees. And now, though at her own telling, he is going away from her to-morrow—though, when next they meet, either they will have put off mortality's tatters, God will have laid

"Death, like a kiss, across their lips;"

or else, to look and lean as he looked and leant to-day will be deadly sin—yet creeps there a sorrowful joy about her heart. He has given her back the past—the short, happy Felton past; no one can take it from her again; not even Miss Blessington, who has taken all else—present and future and all. She is dreaming of him now—dreaming that she is sitting in the library at Felton, in the fragrant gloom made by the lowered Venetian blinds, by dark oak bookshelves, by plentiful sweet flowers, and so sitting hears the sound of his quick feet coming along the passage. He is at the door—he is opening it. But, ah! what is this?—it will not open; it is stiff on its hinges. He is pushing it—pushing gently, pushing hard—but it will not move. What a stealthy noise it is he makes, as if he were afraid of some one hearing him! She starts up, broad awake; it is not all dream; there is some one pushing stealthily, yet audibly, against a

door. For the first bewildered moment of sick fear she imagines that it is her own door on which this attempt is being made; but a moment's listening undeceives her. The sound comes from underneath her window, apparently. It is not rats this time; a rat, with all its ingenuity, would be puzzled to make a noise so distinctly human. Upon her mind there flashes suddenly the recollection of a door leading into the garden beneath her casement, but not so immediately beneath but that she can see it; a door that stands wide open all the summer through, when people step from house to garden, from garden to house, a hundred times a day, but which in winter is rarely used. She sits up motionless, while round her utter darkness surges. The noise is repeated: push—push! creak—creak! it is as if some one, with hand and knee, were attempting to obtain entrance. When light is withdrawn hearing becomes preternaturally sharpened; in an instant she has jumped

out of bed, and run barefoot over the cold boards to the window. There, pulling aside the blind, she, trembling all over, peeps out. Moon is there none, but the joint light of countless star-squadrons, faint though it be, is yet strong enough to enable her distinctly to make out the figure of a man pressing itself against the door in question. With bodily eyes she at length looks upon that burglar, whom, with the terrified eyes of imagination, she had so often beheld. Whether he wear a crape-mask or not it is too dark to discern. What *is* she to do?—she, in all probability, the only wakeful, conscious being in all that great house. For a minute she stands irresolute, while a rushing sound fills her ears, and her teeth chatter dismally in the cold. Shall she alarm the servants? But how to reach them? She does not even know the way to their sleeping-places. They are miles away, in the other wing of the house, where she has never been. Shall she go to Miss Blessington? At

least she knows the way thither, though it is some distance off. But of what avail would that be? Of what use would two girls be, any more than one, against the onslaught of daring unscrupulous robbers? Shall she betake herself to St. John, whose room is but two doors off? No sooner does this idea suggest itself to her, than she puts it into practice. Hastily striking a light, and wrapping her dressing-gown round her, she opens her door, and, flying down the passage, knocks loudly at Mr. Gerard's. But Gerard, having a not particularly bad conscience, and a particularly good digestion, is a sound sleeper. She knocks again, more violently, almost to the flaying of her knuckles: "Mr. Gerard! —Mr. Gerard!"

"Hullo! who's there?" responds a sleepy voice.

"It's I! Esther!" she cries pantingly. "Open the door, please—this minute—quick!"

"*Esther!—you!*" says the voice perfectly

awake this time. "What on earth is the matter?—wait one second!"

He hurries on his clothes, and then hastens to accede to her request of opening the door.

"Are you ill? he asks, anxiously, seeing her lean against the door-post, with death-white cheeks and terror-struck eyes.

"No—no!" she answers, hoarse and breathless, while St. John, candle, and door, all seem to be dancing a jig round her. "It is not I, but there's a man—getting into the house—by the garden-door. I saw him!"

"The devil there is!" replies the young man, with animation. "Here, give me your candle, and I'll go and see what he wants."

"No—no!" she cries, with all a woman's unreason. "Don't go, you must not!" (though for what other purpose she had sought his assistance she would have been puzzled to say). "I won't let you; you'll be killed!" and so, gasping, stretches

out her white arms towards him, and, letting drop her candle, falls insensible, in the total darkness, into his embrace.

For a month past and more, the dream that has pursued Gerard night and day—unchecked in sleep, in waking faintly repressed by considerations of honour—is to hold that fair woman's form in his arms; and now he so holds her in reality. And yet, as the fulfilment of our wishes seldom affords us the gratification we had anticipated, so it is with him. Now that he has got her, he does not quite know what to do with her. Shall he, encumbered by his beautiful burden, grope his way back into his room, and lay her down there, while he goes and investigates into the cause of her terror and swoon? But the household, being alarmed, may find her there; and, so finding, would not the reputation of her, most innocent, be endangered? Her head droops heavy in its perfect lifelessness on his shoulder; her soft warm hair caresses his cheek in

the blackness of the night. He looks down the passage. From Esther's open door a flood of light streams; at all events there is a candle left burning there. In a moment he has borne her into her own chamber, and has laid her most gently down upon the ginger-moreen bed. He has no time to try and revive her now. "Perhaps it was only her own imagination, poor child!—her own imagination, and those infernal rats!" is the hasty thought that has crossed his mind; but looking through the window, as she had done, he sees, as she had seen, a man's dim figure in the starlight. Without a moment's delay, without casting another thought even to the fair swooned woman he leaves behind him, Gerard runs down the corridor, his blood pleasantly astir with the thought of a possible adventure—through interminable dark galleries, down the gleaming cold of white stone stairs, through hall, saloon, north drawing-room, and justicing-room—till he reaches a nar-

row short passage that leads to the garden door. As he and his light drew near, the noise suddenly ceases. He stands still for a moment, expecting to hear it repeated, but it is not. Setting down his candle, therefore, he advances towards the door and unfastens it—it is secured by an old fashioned catch inside—opens it, and looks out into the night. At first he can discern nothing but the chill wintry garden, and the million stars scattered broadcast over God's one great unenclosed field of the sky; but a second glance reveals to him a dim figure crouching indistinct in the shadow of a projecting buttress.

"Who's there?" he cries, in a loud clear voice.

No answer.

"Who's there?" he repeats. "If you don't answer, I'll fire."

Firing, in this instance, must mean using the flat candlestick as a projectile, for other weapon has Mr. Gerard none. Hardly have the words left his mouth,

however, before the figure springs forth from its hiding-place, and stands erect before him.

"Don't fire, sir, please; it's I."

Livery-buttons flash in the starlight: behold the culprit revealed!—a young and lighthearted footman, who has on one or two previous occasions been suspected of a too great proclivity towards the nocturnal festivities of the "Chequers." A sense of infuriation at the bald tame end of the adventure gets possession of St. John.

"What the devil do you mean, sir, skulking here, alarming the whole household, and frightening the young ladies out of their senses?" he asks, with a gruff asperity not unworthy of his papa.

"If you please, sir, I was only—only—taking a bit of a walk in the park, sir."

"A likely tale!" cries St. John, angrily. "A walk in the park at this time of night! Come, don't let us have any lies, my good fellow; that is covering a small fault with a much greater one. You were at the

'Chequers,' I suppose? Come, out with it!"

"If you please, sir," replies the man, hanging his head, and looking very sheepish, "there was a young woman, as come all the way from Shelford, and as she was a bit timid, I promised to send her home."

"A young woman!" repeats St. John, repressing an inclination to smile. "Well, next time, you must be good enough to choose more seasonable hours for your meetings with young women."

"And when I come back, sir, I found all the house made up for the night, and I could not get no one to hear me; and I thought as how, very like, I might find this 'ere door open, if so be as Betsy had forgot to bolt it, as she mostly does, only it is so plaguy stiff on its 'inges——"

"And, for a wonder, Betsy had not forgotten to bolt it," interrupts Gerard, drily. "Well, don't let us have anything of this kind again, or, I warn you, you'll be packed off without a character."

Relieved at being let off so easily, the

young fellow slinks away, and Gerard retraces his steps upstairs again. He cannot help laughing as he thinks of poor Esther's tragic fears, of her agonised pleadings: "You *must* not go! I won't let you go! you'll be killed!"

"If I'm never in nearer peril of death than I was to-night," he thinks, "I have every chance of outliving Methuselah. Was ever mountain delivered of so contemptible a mouse?" He laughs again. "'I won't let you! you'll be killed!' Poor little thing! I wonder has she come to herself yet! I must let her know that this bloodthirsty villain has not slain me outright this time." Having reached her door, he pauses and listens. There is no sound within. He knocks gently — no answer: knocks again — still no reply. Half-hesitating, as one that stands doubtful on the threshold of a church, he opens the door and enters. The light burns on the dressing-table, and she lies still prone, where he had laid her, on the bed, still

completely insensible. This swoon is horribly deathlike:

". . . . . But she lies
Not in the embrace of loyal death, who keeps
His bride for ever, but in treacherous arms
Of sleep, that sated, will restore to grief
Her snatch'd a sweet space from his cruel clutch."

Her head is thrown back, and her round chin slightly raised. Over the tossed pillow wander the tangled riches of her swart hair; nerveless on the counterpane lie the white carven hands and blue-veined wrists, on which the faint fine lines make a tender network. Half-shadowed by her dressing-gown, half-emerging from it gleam bare feet,

"That make the blown foam neither swift nor white."

He leans over her, gazing with passionate admiration at the heavy shut lids and upward curling lashes—with passionate admiration mixed with sharp pain; for he can see, plainlier now in this long quiet look than in the hasty stolen glances he

has hitherto given her, the purple stains under closed eyes, the little depressions in the rounded cheek, the droop of the sweet sorrowful mouth. Iachimo's words recur to him—Iachimo's, as he gazed in his treachery upon the sleeping beauty of Imogen:

". . . . . Cytherea!
How bravely thou becom'st thy bed! fresh lily!
And whiter than the sheets! That I might touch!
But kiss—one kiss! Rubies unparagon'd,
How dearly they do 't!—'Tis her breathing that
Perfumes the chamber thus. The flame o' the taper
Bows towards her, and would underpeep her lids
To see the enclosed lights, now canopied
Under those windows . . . . . ."

But looking at a person with ever such warm approbation will not recover them from a swoon. What is he to do? He is horribly puzzled, so seldom before has he seen a fainted fellow-Christian. Vague ideas of having heard of burnt feathers held under nostrils recur to his mind. But whence to obtain feathers, unless he takes a pair of scissors and snips a hole in the

feather-bed? There is nothing in all the great room more feathery than the stumpy end of an old quill-pen, with which Miss Craven is wont to indite her small accounts. Another specific flashes before his mental eye. Smelling-salts! He walks to the dressing-table, and carefully overlooks its slender load: brushes and combs, a Bible, and a fat pincushion — neither essence, unguent, nor scent of any kind. Esther's toilet apparatus is but meagre. Shall he throw cold water over her? What! and deluge all the ginger-moreen bed, thereby making it an even more undesirable resting-place than it is at present? Quite at a loss what to do, he returns to the bedside, and begins to chafe her cold hands between his two warm ones. Then he stoops over her, trying to discover any smallest sign of returning consciousness. When his lips are so close to hers, how can he help laying them yet closer? Men seldom do resist any temptation, unless it is very weak, and the objections to it very

overwhelming. This temptation is not weak, and there are absolutely no objections to it. No one will ever know of this theft—not even the person upon whom it is committed: it will do her no harm, and to kiss her even thus unknowing, unreturning, gives him a bitter joy. But, having once kissed her, he refrains himself, nor lays his lips a second time upon hers. Something of shame comes over him, as one that has taken advantage of another's helplessness—one that, for an instant, has let the brute within him get the upper hand of the man. Only he caresses gently her two cold hands, and his eyes dwell on her face, watching longingly for the first small symptom of back-coming life. His patience is rewarded, after a time; after a time there comes a quivering about the eyelids, a tremor about the mouth—then a deep-drawn sighing respiration. Always with a sigh does the soul come back to its dark cottage, having journeyed away from it

for awhile. The curtain-lids sweep back from the spirit's windows; and, pale and clear, her eyes' dark glories shine upon him, conscious yet bewildered. Then a little stealing red, like the tint that dwelt in a sea-shell's lips, flows into each pure cheek; then comes full consciousness, and with it recollected terrors. "Where is he?" she asks, in a low frightened voice. "Is he gone?—did he get in?—did he hurt you?"

"He was not a very formidable burglar, after all," Gerard answers, with a reassuring smile: "it was only Thomas, who had been seeing his sweetheart home, and was trying to get into the house without being heard."

"Oh, I'm so glad! But" (her eyes straying confusedly round the room) "how did I get here? When last I remember anything I was in the passage."

"I carried you here."

"And then went and found out about this man?"

"Yes."

"And then came back here?"

"Yes. I hope you don't think me very impertinent," he says, apologetically; "but I could not bear the idea of your lying here, insensible, without any one making an attempt to bring you round."

Recollecting what his own method of bringing her round had been, his conscience gives him a compunctious stab. She blushes furiously, and, raising herself into a sitting posture, begins to twist up her hair with both hands.

"You are better now," he says, tenderly, but with perfect respect; "I will go."

He moves towards the door, but, before he can reach it, it flies open hastily; and Constance, dishevelled, dressing-gowned, flurried out of all likeness to herself, bursts in. "Oh, Miss Craven! I'm so frightened! I heard people talking outside——*St. John!!*"

Mrs. Siddons might have been defied to crowd more solemnly tragic emphasis into one word than does Miss Blessington into the innocent dissyllable, "St. John!"

"Well!" replies St. John, tartly, vexed past speaking at being discovered in such an utterly false position.

"I suppose I may be allowed to ask what brings *you* here?" she says, drawing herself up to her stately height.

"You certainly may," he answers, endeavouring to recover his self-possession; "and I have not the slightest objection to telling you. What brought me here was the endeavour to recover Miss Craven from a faint into which she fell on coming to tell me—as the only person within her reach—that a man was, as she imagined, endeavouring to break into the house."

Even to his own ears this tale, as he tells it, sounds wofully improbable.

"And you took no steps to prevent him?" cries Constance, quickly; her fears

for her personal safety, for the moment, outweighing the claims of outraged virtue.

"Pardon me! I did; but having discovered that it was only one of the footmen, who had been accidentally locked out, I came back to tell Miss Craven so, if she were recovered; and, if not, to give her that assistance which any one human being may render to another without being called to account for it."

Having spoken, he folds his arms, and confronts her, calm and stately as herself.

"I should hardly have imagined it was *your* business," she replies, with scarce-concealed incredulity. "May I ask why you could not ring for the servants?"

"Because, as you are well aware," he answers, trying to quell his rising anger, "if I were to ring from now till doomsday, not a soul would hear me: all the bells ring downstairs, and the servants' bedrooms are at least a quarter of a mile distant up-stairs."

"Why could not you have come to me, then?"

"The impropriety would, in that case, have been at least equal," he answers, sarcastically; "and, to tell you the truth, such a course never occurred to me."

Something in his tone irritates her. "It is, of course, no concern of mine," she says, with icy coldness. "If Miss Craven chooses to receive the visits of gentlemen, HERE, at two o'clock in the morning, it does *me* no harm!"

She moves towards the door, but he places himself between her and it; and, grasping her wrist with unconscious roughness, speaks in a voice low and hoarse with anger, while his roused wrath glances upon her from out of his grey eyes—the eyes that hitherto have looked upon her only with indifference.

"Constance! what do you mean by these insults? How dare you give utterance to them? Is your own mind so

impure that you cannot believe in the purity of others?"

"You must allow that it is at least an equivocal position," she answers, half-frightened by his stern looks, but keeping resolutely to her text.

"It is," he answers, remorsefully; "I allow it—I bitterly feel it. And yet, if it were only myself that were concerned, I should scorn to descend to any more explanation than that I have already given you; but for the sake of this most innocent girl, whom by my folly I have compromised, I swear to you, Constance—I solemnly take God to witness!—that it is exactly and simply as I have told you. Miss Craven had not recovered from her insensibility more than two minutes before you came into the room; I was in the act of leaving it as you entered. This is the whole plain truth: do you believe it?"

She does not answer.

"Do you believe it?" he repeats, earnestly.

The mulish look comes into her face —the look he has begun to know so well.

"It cannot be of much consequence to you whether I believe it or not," she answers, still with that freezing calm of voice and face. "You have, at all events, adopted the best method of obtaining your release from that engagement, which you so broadly hinted, only yesterday afternoon, that you wished to be free from. You have your wish—you are free!"

"As you will," he answers, gloomily. "God knows there never was much love in our connection; an iller-mated pair never came together; it was a mere matter of business on both sides. But, as to saying that the pure accident which has brought Miss Craven and me into slight and transient collision to-night can have any influence upon the conclusion or continuance of our engagement—it is tantamount to telling me that what I have sworn to you, upon my honour as a gentle-

man, to be true, is false!" he says, his face growing white and fierce.

"Is it?" she says, with a quietly enraging smile; having that confidence in the shield of womanhood, which makes so many a woman gall a man to the uttermost, and expect him to stand by, serene, polite, and smiling. "Unfortunately," she continues, "I am behind the spirit of the age; I am shackled with obsolete old notions of propriety and decency; and therefore — as you have no longer any smallest control over my actions—will you be so good as to allow me to go?"

He drops her hand instantly, and, opening the door for her, bows his head haughtily, saying, "Go! I have neither the wish nor the power to detain you;" and as he so speaks she passes out.

Meanwhile Esther, having slidden from her bed, stands with trembling limbs, grasping the back of a chair, and gazing from speaker to speaker with a world of surprise and horror in her great innocent

eyes. As Miss Blessington leaves the room, St. John turns to her:

"My darling!" he says, with an accent of passionate remorse, "how will you ever forgive me for having exposed you to this!"

She turns away from him, and covers her burning face with her hands. "Go!" she says, faintly—"go, this minute! Don't say another word! Don't give her any more reason for her wicked slanders! Go!"

And he goes.

CHAPTER XII.

Of the three persons whose repose has been disturbed by the amours of Thomas the footman, only one is able to take up again the thread of interrupted slumber. Miss Blessington, having returned to her chamber, and having meditated calmly for a quarter of an hour on the knot in her destiny she has just untied, and having given one great sigh to the memory of the Gerard diamonds, lays down her golden scented head on her pillow again, and sleeps the sleep of the just. Miss Blessington has well nigh mastered the secret of eternal youth and perennial beauty—incapacity for feeling any emotion. It is hardly likely that the god Sleep, who loves a quiet house, will visit two such

unquiet temples as the brains of St. John and Esther; he goes away from them utterly, taking his gentle poppyheads with him.

St. John walks miles and miles up and down his bedroom carpet, pondering, deeply and vexedly, not on what his own course of conduct shall be — *that* he is already determined upon—but on what effect Miss Blessington's coldly sceptical reception of his wildly improbable yet true tale is likely to have upon Esther.

And Esther herself, having conceived a mortal aversion for the shelter of the ginger-canopied pavilion, wraps a great shawl round her, and, sitting down on the deep window-seat, watches for the first streak of dawn, which, on these winter mornings, are long, long coming. Though it is a winter night, her hands burn hot and dry; for the last few days she has had a sharp pain in her side—to-night it is getting yet sharper; it begins to hurt her to draw her breath. Two thoughts keep

buzzing about her brain. "I am going to be ill," and "I am going to be turned away." She throws aside her shawl, but the dry burning still continues. She has sat here for hours now, and the dawn's feet are beginning slowly to climb the steps from the eastern gate. The battle between day and night is yet undecided; almost equally they divide the sky between them. Perhaps it is the night's excitement that has given her this fever; perhaps the cold morning air would refresh her. She waits until day's victory is complete, and then—being already dressed—puts on her hat and jacket, and steals noiselessly downstairs, to the garden-door that has been the cause of so much mischief, out into the garden between the brown-earthed beds, where the winter aconite's small yellow heads and green tippets are beginning to push themselves into sight, and thence into the park.

There is no wind abroad, only heavy rain-clouds outwalling the infant sun, and

the unwarmed air has a piercing chillness in it. Esther has not proceeded far, and is standing thoughtful on the brow of a little knoll, from whence one looks down on the dark flag-fringed pool, when she is aware of a footstep behind her; and the next instant St. John Gerard stands by her side.

"What have you come here for? Why have you followed me?" she asks, turning upon him in hasty dismay. "Miss Blessington's windows look this way—she will see us together."

"Let her see us," he answers, doggedly.

"She will never believe that it was by accident we have met," cries poor Esther, in great agitation.

"She will be right, then; it is not accident."

"She will think that it was an appointment!" she says, clasping her hands in unfeigned distress.

"Let her think so!"

"It is very well for you to talk in this

way," she says, with passionate reproach. "You are a man—you may defy the opinion of the world; but is it so easy for me?"

"Why should her opinion concern either you or me?" he inquires, gravely. "What is she to either of us? Did not you last night, with your own ears, hear my dismissal pronounced?"

She stoops her head until her hat almost conceals her face from him.

"She was angry," she says, in a low voice; "she will be sorry for the things she said; she will forgive you."

"Will she?" he answers, quietly smiling. "I think not; to tell you the truth, I don't mean to ask her."

She lifts her face, suddenly earnest, to him.

"You *must!*" she says, eagerly. "You must explain to her, as you tried to do last night, that what happened then" (a painful blush) "is no possible reason why her engagement to you should be broken

off. You must convince her of this—you must, indeed; for my sake *you must!*"

He looks down, frowning heavily.

"When a galley-slave's chains have been knocked off, must he handcuff himself again?"

"Why did you handcuff yourself at first?" she asks, with impulsive vehemence. "Whose doing was it but your own? What madness first impelled you to ask her to marry you?"

"Because," he answers, with emotion, fixing his upbraiding eyes upon her—"because I was smarting miserably under the blow you had just given me—you, who had made me mistrust everything attractive, and womanly, and innocent-seeming. I was obliged to marry some one; that is one of the many curses attached to being an eldest son, and the last male heir of an inconveniently old family. I said to myself, 'She is too dull to deceive me, too passionless to disgrace me.' I chose her because she was, of all the

women I knew, the one least capable of calling forth emotion of any kind whatever in me—consequently, the one most powerless to make me suffer."

The words of his defence came quick and hurried. She is silent for a moment; then, uplifting imploring eyes to his: "Mr. Gerard," she says, tremblingly, "the twenty-four hours you asked me to allow you yesterday are nearly expired: have you come to say 'good-bye' to me? If so, it is well; you remember your promise?"

"I remember it," he answers, slowly, "and I am prepared to—*break* it. Don't look so reproachful, Esther! I am ready to make you as good a one instead. I am ready to swear," he says, his face all kindling in the grey cold morning with eager passion—"I am ready to swear to you that I will never leave you again, unless you send me away, until death do us part. Will that promise do as well as the other?"

She gives a little cry of astonishment. "What do you mean?" she asks, faintly, moving a step farther away from him.

"I mean," he says, solemnly, his countenance all shining with the light of a great new joy, "that I am sick of my life without you, Esther; and you—you are sick of yours without me, aren't you?"

She cannot deny it, and is unwilling to allow it; so keeps a troubled silence.

"There must be some reason," he continues, passionately, "for your failing health, for your thin white cheeks, for your total loss of beauty (with a smile), as Constance tersely worded it yesterday. Am I right; or is it my conceit that makes me think that I have some concern in the change?"

"You are mistaken," she cries, hastily—the idea that pity for her miserable appearance has brought him back to her flashing gallingly across her mind. "I was very fond of you—*very;* it was a great grief to me when you threw me

away from you; but I could have done without you, if—if—I had not lost my boy."

She turns away, to hide her quivering lips and swelling tears: it is so seldom that she speaks of her dead, that the mere naming of him seems to make his loss the clearer.

Gerard's face falls a little. "Could you?" he says, simply and sadly. "No doubt! I was unreasonable to suppose that *I* could be indispensable to any one."

They walk on in silence side by side. It is beginning to rain, heavy drops ushering in a winter storm. The deer-barn is near—the deer-barn, with steep red roof, lichen-painted, standing on a little rise, among a company of ancient hornbeams, whose twisted trunks lean this way and that. For the last twenty years, every young lady that has come to stay at the hall has sketched the deer-barn.

"This is not fit weather for you to be

out in," Gerard says, solicitously glancing at his companion's slight figure and fever-bright eyes. "Let us shelter here till the storm is over!"

Having reached it, Esther stands watching heaven's quick large tears falling heavy on Earth's chill breast; St. John walks up and down on the rough earth-floor, buried in thought. At length, rousing himself, he approaches Esther, and speaks, calmly at first, but with increasing vehemence as he proceeds:

"Esther, I have been thinking what a short section of my life, counting by days and weeks, the time that I have known you forms; that month at Felton, when we had scarcely eyes or ears for any one but each other, and this month here, when we have hardly exchanged two words. I suppose I know very little about you, *really;* you may be a very bad worthless girl, for all I know to the contrary. God knows I have not had much reason to think you a very good one; and yet,

good or bad—well, as you say, and as I have no reason to doubt, that you can get on without me—I cannot, for the life of me, bear any longer the dragging of the endless empty days without you. Esther!" he says, with passionate hunger in his eyes, "I *want* you! I *must* have you for my own! Is there now any reason why I should not?"

"Have you forgotten," she asks, with a melancholy smile, "the night when you told me that you would never forgive me, either in this world or the next? What have I done since to make you change your mind? I am no different to what I was then—unless, perhaps, I may be a little wickeder; I have been most unhappy, and adversity makes one wicked."

"I suppose I have lost my senses," he answers, with excitement; "but it seems to me now that, even were you to deceive me again, as you did at Felton—if you were to cheat me, and tell me falsehoods with the same baby-innocent face that you

did there—that even then I should not repent of my bargain. Of two evils it would be the least; it would be better than never to have possessed you at all. Only, child, one thing I beg of you," he continues, with reproachful entreaty: "if you mean to trick me a second time, don't let me find it out for a little while! Let me be happy for a year—a month—a week!"

Her eyes rest on the ground, and a painful red spreads on either cheek. Despite the honest yearning love that vibrates along his voice, she cannot cast out from her heart that galling suspicion that has stolen there.

"You are very good," she makes answer, in a constrained voice; "and it is very generous of you trying to hide your real motive; but I can see it: it is *pity!* You look at me, and think, 'She was a pretty girl once, and now she has grown old and thin and plain, and it is all for love of me!' Yes, it is pity!"

"You are right," he answers, earnestly;

"it is pity, profound pity, for the most miserable, discontented fellow upon God's earth—to wit, myself."

She raises her eyes slowly, and fixes them searchingly on his eager flushing face; and, looking, can doubt no longer.

"If I was over-harsh to you that night at Felton," he continues, rapidly, and I am willing now to own that I was—for, after all, it was not against me that you had most greatly sinned—I have, at all events, paid heavily enough for it. What do you suppose I have suffered during the last month, watching you day by day wearing out your young life in a cold servile drudgery—hearing you strain your poor little tired voice in the interminable readings to that insatiable old man! Essie, I'm not a particularly pleasant fellow to live with—sometimes I believe I am particularly unpleasant—but, at *my worst*, I'm not so bad as old Blessington."

At that she laughs a little, but shakes her head.

"Why do you shake your head?" he asks, manlike, pursuing the hotlier the more she seems to hold back. "Is it," he says (a heavy fear quickening his pulses, and making his voice come thick and harsh), "that you want to tell me by signs, what you dare not tell me in words to my face, that the old love is *dead*, killed by my hard words that miserable night at Felton? Oh, love! it must have been but a weakly thing; if a few rough words could kill it."

She does not answer.

"You *did* love me once, Esther," he continues, vehemently; "I know you did! I knew it then, only, in my blind rage, I affected to disbelieve it. You *must* have loved me, when you, who had always been so shy, so reserved, so maidenly to me, of your own accord—do you recollect, sweet?—held out your arms to me, and flung yourself upon my breast. God only knows how hard it was for me to put you away!"

At the recollection his speech calls up, her face is stirred with a convulsive emotion; but still she holds her peace.

"Esther, speak!—and yet, perhaps, when you have spoken, I shall wish that you had kept silence. Say anything you will, do anything you will, only don't kill me by telling me that so sweet a thing can be *dead!*"

She lifts her heavy eyes to him, and in them is the look of a hunted animal. "Why do you torment me with these questions?" she asks, passionately. "If my love for you is dead, you ought to be thankful; for, while it was alive, it brought nothing but misery to either of us."

"If you think so, it must indeed be dead," he answers, deeply wounded.

"Why will you insist on driving me into a corner?" she asks, with the accent of a person rendered irritable by pain. "Why will you force me to make admissions that I don't want to make? What is the

good of my owning that I love you still, when I am determined never to marry you?"

"*Never to marry me!*" he repeats; unable, in his immense surprise, to do more than say her own words after her. A man is always overwhelmed with astonishment at the idea of any woman not being overjoyed to espouse him.

"Never to marry you!" she reiterates, steadily. "I was a bad-enough match for you before—without fortune, position, or connexion; people would have pitied you then for being drawn into such a marriage; but now——"

"But now, what?"

"But now that I am a *companion*," she continues, with a bitter pride—"an anomalous animal, just two shades higher than the lady's-maid in my own estimation, and probably not that in any one else's—a companion, too, of whom people can say the things that Miss Blessington will say of me now——"

"What do you mean! What sort of things *can* she say?"

But Esther maintains a shamed red silence.

"That you are completely *passée?*"

"No, not that!—that would not concern me much."

"That the way you cough in the evening fidgets her to death?"

"No, not that!"

"That you are oversensitive, as these sort of people always are?" (with a faint mimicking of Miss Blessington's slow languor of articulation).

"No, not that!"

"What then?"

"You *must* remember the things she said; you were there, and it is not more than five hours ago," she answers, with some impatience.

"I forget every word she uttered except three."

"And what were they?"

"You are free."

"She did not mean them," says Esther, trying to speak with dispassionate calmness; "she was under an erroneous impression when she said them; she will take you back again."

"Take me back again!" he repeats, angrily. "Good heavens, Esther! are you bent on driving me mad? Not satisfied with refusing me point-blank yourself, are you determined to insult me, by forcing upon me a woman for whom, as you know —as you must have known from the first moment you saw us together—I have never felt anything but the profoundest, coldest indifference?"

"I meant no insult," she replies, apologetically: "I only meant to say what is true—that *she* is a suitable match for you —that *she* is your equal."

"Is she?" he retorts ironically. "You are very good, I'm sure; I ask for bread, and you give me a stone. For God's sake, Essie, if you will have nothing to say to me yourself, at least spare me the degra-

dation of listening to your kind and disinterested plans for my welfare!"

Under this severe snub, Miss Craven remains silent.

"Is it," he continues, presently, his indignation being a little cooled, "the mere fact of my being well-off that damns me in your eyes? If so, I think I may plead 'not guilty,' seeing that this oppressive wealth of mine lies on the other side of Sir Thomas's death—an event probably, at least, as distant as the millennium.

She gazes out (not seeing it the while) at the driving rain, while a troubled look flits over her small grave face; but she says neither "Yea" nor "Nay."

"When I am asking you to give me your whole sweet life," he cries, impulsively, snatching one of her little cold hands, "are you so ungenerous as to wish me to have absolutely nothing to offer you in return?"

Still silence.

"Essie!" he says, drawing her nearer to him, and looking resolutely down into her timid reluctant eyes, "I don't ask you to have pity upon me—that is a puling, cowardly way of making love, I always think; if the only road to a woman's heart lies through her compassion, I had rather never get there at all—but I ask you to pity *yourself*. To be my wife, ill-tempered and jealous as I, no doubt, should often be, would be distinctly a better fate than to be old Blessington's drudge. Child! have you no pity for yourself?"

"None whatever," she answers, with emotion. "I am not in the least sorry for myself: I richly deserve everything that is come to me. As long as I am unhappy myself, I can better bear the recollection of my vile conduct to the best and loyalest lover ever any woman had: if I began to be happy, I think my remorse would kill me."

He drops her hand suddenly, with a gesture of anger. "I have been sacrificed

to him once already," he says, fiercely; "am I to be sacrificed a second time to a sentimental recollection of him—to the mere memory of his perfections?"

She raises her rejected hand and its fellow deprecatingly towards him. "Don't be angry with me," she cries, pleadingly; "this has nothing to say to him; the reason why I will not marry you is that I am a *mésalliance* for you."

"That is my concern, I imagine," he answers, stiffly.

"I think not," she rejoins, gently. "You have lost your senses, as you told me just now; you are mad, and I am sane; therefore I can judge better than you yourself what is for your good: some day you will agree with me!"

"Never!" he replies, empathically; and with that, she standing nigh, and the temptation being mighty, he flings his arms *sans cérémonie* about her supple body, and strains her to his breast.

Outside, the rain streams down with a

continuous quiet noise; the dappled deer are herding their branchy heads together under the old leafless hornbeams for shelter, For one moment Esther lies passive in her lover's arms, yielding to the bliss of that rough embrace; and, after all, among the blisses that we wot of, what is there so great as,

> "After long grief and pain,
> To feel the arms of your true love
> Round you once again?"

Then her recollected resolution comes back. "Let me go," she says, faintly; "this is not right!"

"Right or wrong," he answers, doggedly, "it is the one moment worth being called 'life' that I have spent since I was fool enough to cut my own throat by parting from you."

"Let me go!" she says, again; and he, holding her still prisoner, but putting her a little farther from him, that he may the more distinctly see the workings of her countenance, says steadily:

"Essie, I am not unjust; I will let you go this instant, to any quarter of the world that you wish, without a word of remonstrance, if you will only look up in my face and say, 'St. John, I don't love you.'"

She lifts, with infinite difficulty, eyes in which pride and shy passion are fighting a duel to the death, and falters: "St. John, I don't——" but, in the mid-utterance of that falsehood, her voice fails suddenly, and she buries her burning shamed face on his breast.

"I knew it," he cries, triumphantly, dropping a light kiss—for has not her hesitation confessed him her owner?—upon her bent head. "I risked my everything upon that test, and it has not failed me. Even your miserable pride, Esther, could not constrain you to such a lie! With your heart beating against mine, as if we had but one between us, your lips did not dare frame those ugly words."

She gives no verbal answer; but, with

head shame-drooped, tries, with trembling hands, to push away the arms that so closely, warmly bind her.

"Oh love!" he cries, with an accent of impatient but tender upbraiding, "are you struggling to get away from me still? Am I never to persuade any good thing to stay with me? Will you never forgive me the sin of being an eldest son? God knows it is not my fault—that it was not my choice to be born amongst the drones! Oh, Essie, is it just of you to punish me for what I cannot help?"

"I don't wish to punish you," she answers, trembling (seeing that she wished to be away from him, he has released her from his arms). "The real way to punish you would be to let you have your will—to say, 'I will marry you, St. John!'"

"In God's name punish me, then! No one ever took chastisement meeklier than I will this."

"And what would the end be?" she asks, sadly. "You would be insanely

happy for a little while—a month—two months, perhaps—and then you would get tired of me. There is nothing in me, I think," she says, simply, "to keep a man's love after the first madness is over: I never had anything but a pretty face, and now even that is gone in the eyes of every one but you."

"What! in Linley's?" he asks, with a half-jealous smile.

She blushes, but goes on, without heeding the enquiry. "Some day you would wake up and say, 'I have thrown myself away;' and I—I prefer to say it for you now, while it is yet time."

He makes a movement to interrupt her, but she continues. "When a person has once lost confidence in another, they can never get it *quite* back again; you would never *quite* trust me. Only the other day you thought hard things of me, because I seemed grateful to Mr. Linley for talking friendlily to me: I saw it in your eyes as you rode past us that night: and—which

is the last and greatest reason of all—you would not like people to say of your wife the things that Miss Blessington will enable them to say of me."

"Even granting," breaks in Gerard, with indignant violence—"and God forbid my ever granting anything of the kind! —that it is in her or any one else's power to blast your reputation, what pleasure could it possibly give one girl to sully the good name of another, whom she must know in her heart of hearts to be as innocent as herself?"

"None whatever, perhaps, if I remain as I am," she answers, collectedly, though a little bitterly. "As Esther Craven, I am too insignificant to clash with her; but if I were to be your wife—if I were to be her successor in that position for which she is, in her own and her friends' opinion, so well suited—would not she be likely to give her own explanation of the change? She would describe things as

they seemed to her, and people would believe her."

"Let them!" he answers scornfully. "If you loved me perfectly, the only people that existed in the world for you would be yourself and me."

"I do not love you perfectly, then, I suppose," she answers, calmly; "for not even the enormous happiness of being with you always, of being half your life, could compensate me for the degradation of bringing you a sullied name."

He turns away, with hands clenched and lips bitten, in the endeavour to be master of his useless surging rage.

"St. John," she says resolutely, laying her hand upon one of his, "you have made me two promises—one that you will go away and leave me to-day, and one that you will leave me never until I send you away. I keep you to the first; I send you away."

"But I will not be sent," he cries fiercely, giving the reins to his passion.

"The conditions under which that promise was made are utterly changed; the obstacle that parted us *then* no longer exists: there is none between us now but what is of your own raising. I am, therefore, no longer bound by that oath; I will not go!"

"Very well," she answers, sighing: "then I must; and when one is to have a foot or a hand cut off, it is best to do it at once. St. John, I will not sleep another night under the same roof with you! Goodbye!"

But he turns away sullenly. "You may say 'goodbye' to me, but I will never say 'goodbye' to you: death is the only 'goodbye' I will accept as valid between us."

She makes no rejoinder, but, slipping from his side out into the wild wintry rain, flies across the park away from him.

"Esther!—Esther!" he calls after her; but the "drip, drip" of the great swollen rain-drops from the eaves of the deer-barn is his only answer.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE rain ceases, and St. John endeavours to work off his disappointment and rage in a very long walk. When he at length re-enters the house, the two old people are hobbling into luncheon, and Miss Blessington sweeping, slowly and alone, after them. Her face is serene, and, to his surprise, wears no bellicose expression towards himself. To tell the truth, during three hours of point-lace work, the Gerard diamonds have kept flashing and gleaming, restless-bright, before her mind's eye. She has been telling herself that she was over hasty in the relinquishment of them—has been resolving to make one effort, if consistent with dignity, for their recapture.

"Does Miss Craven know that luncheon is ready?" asks St. John of the butler, when they have all been seated for some minutes.

"If you please, sir, I don't think that Miss Craven is coming to lunch."

"Why not?—is she ill?" he inquires, anxiously, perfectly indifferent as to whether his anxiety is remarked or no.

"I believe she is rather poorly, sir."

Luncheon over, the old people are convoyed back to their arm-chairs. Gerard stands with his back to the hall-fire, with the *Times* in his hand. Constance, under some pretext of looking over the day's papers, lingers near him.

"I have been telling my aunt about our alarm last night, St. John," she says, as sweetly as usual.

"Indeed!"

"And its tame prosaic *dénouement*."

"Indeed!"

"I am afraid I was unreasonably angry with you for what was evidently a mere

accident; but when one is nervous and frightened, one really does not know what one says. I'm sure I have the vaguest recollection of what I said."

"I remember distinctly what you said, Constance."

"Indeed!" (with a smooth low laugh). "You don't bear malice, I hope? Things are much as they were before, I suppose?"

He lays down his paper, and looks at her steadily with his clear grey eyes. "Things are between us as they have been all our lives up to last October; as they have been since then, they will never be again."

She turns away quickly, to hide the mortification which even the cold pure mask of her face cannot wholly conceal.

"That is what I meant," she answers, quietly—with great presence of mind endeavouring to prevent her defeat from being converted into a rout; and though she deceives neither herself nor him, the effort to do both is at least laudable.

And Esther, interrupted midway in the packing of her few and paltry goods by the sharper recurrence of that pain in her side, lies on her bed, shut out by the strength of that bodily agony from all power of mental suffering. The excitement of the night—the exposure to the chill morning air—the thorough wetting undergone in her wild run through the park, amid the driving rain, have hastened the coming of that great sickness with which for weeks past she has been threatened.

Darkness falls: dinner-time comes. Presently the housemaid, who had formerly given her the laudanum, knocks at her door.

"Dinner, please, miss."

"I cannot go down," answers the poor child, rather piteously, sitting up, and pushing away the tumbled hair from her flushed cheeks, while her eyes blink in the candlelight. "I don't want any dinner; I'm ill!"

"Dear me, 'm! you *do* look bad!" exclaims the woman, drawing nearer to the bed, and speaking with an accent half-shocked, half-pleased; for, in a servant's eyes, the next best thing to a death in the house is a serious illness. "Would not you like to have Mr. Brand sent for?"

"Oh, no—thanks!" replies the girl, sinking wearily back on her pillow. "I daresay it will go of itself."—"If I did send for him, I have no money to pay for him," is her mental reflection.

The evening drags away about as heavily as usuál in the saloon. Gerard, having ascertained that Miss Craven is still in the house, and has consequently broken her resolution of not sleeping another night under the same roof with him, tries to content himself with the idea that to-morrow—her temporary indisposition probably past—he will have another opportunity of reasoning and pleading with her. About nine o'clock Miss Blessington's maid appears at the door.

"Please 'm, might I speak to you for a moment?"

"Certainly," answers Constance, graciously, rising and walking off to the demanded conference.

Constance is always polite to her servants; it is bad style, middle-class to be rude to one's inferiors.

"If you please, 'm, I really think as something oughter to be done for Miss Craven; she is uncommon bad, poor young lady!"

"What is the matter with her?" inquires the other, placidly: "nothing but influenza, I daresay; it always goes through a house.

"Indeed, 'm, I don't know; but she has a hawful pain in her side, and she can scarce draw her breath, and she is hot—as hot as fire."

"Good heavens!" cries Constance, thoroughly roused by this gay picture; "I hope it is not anything *catching!*"

Reassured on this point, and having

ordered the attendance of Mr. Brand, she returns unruffled to the fireside.

"What was that mysterious communication, Constance?" asks St. John, lazily, quite willing to be amicable now that their relative positions are made clearly evident.

"She only came to tell me that Miss Craven was very unwell," she answers, carelessly. "Servants exaggerate so; I daresay it is nothing!"

"What is the matter with her?" he asks, hurriedly.

"I really don't know," she replies, drily; "you had better wait till Mr. Brand comes, and ask him."

Ten o'clock! The old couple are trundled off to their separate apartments; and Miss Blessington, having biddon St. John a cold "good-night," sails, candle in hand, up the grand staircase, to that sleep that never fails to come at her calm bidding. Gerard foregoes his evening pipe, because the smoking-room does not look to the front. In painful unrest, he un-

fastens the shutters of one of the saloon-windows, and, raising the stiff and seldom-opened sash, leans out, looking and listening—looking at the maiden moon that rides, pale and proud, while black ruffian clouds chase each other to overtake her. Mr. Brand is out, apparently; for half-past ten has been struck, in different tones—bass and treble, deep and squeaky — by half-a-dozen different clocks, and still he has not arrived. At length, to the watcher's strained ear, comes the sound of wheels descending the steep pitch, from Blessington village; then a brougham's lamps gleam, issuing from between the rhododendron banks, and roll, like two angry eyes, to the door. In his feverish anxiety, and impatience at the long tarrying of the sleepy footman, St. John himself admits the doctor; and, following him at a little distance, as he is ushered upstairs, sits down in his own bedroom, with the door wide open, ready to pounce out upon the small Æsculapius, as he

passes along the gallery at his departure, and learn his verdict.

The visit is rather a long one: to St. John, sitting still in his idle impatient misery, it seems as though the sound of Esther's opening door would never come; but never is a long day. At length the welcome sound is heard; and the young man, precipitating himself into the passage, comes face to face with a small elderly gentleman, shiveringly taking his way down the unwarmed ghostly old corridors.

"Is it a serious case?" he asks, abruptly, framing the simple words as they rise from his full heart.

Mr. Brand stares, surprised, at his questioner's blanched face. He had imagined that his patient was a little friendless orphan companion, whose life or death—save as a mere matter of compassion—were subjects of almost equal indifference to the people under whose roof she lies, panting out her young life.

"*Serious?* Well—oh! I assure you there is no cause for alarm, my dear sir," he says, imagining that he has got the key to the mystery; "it is nothing infectious, I assure you—nothing whatever!"

"That is not what I asked," rejoins Gerard, bluntly. "I don't care whether it is infectious or not; is it *dangerous?*"

"Are you any relation of the young lady, may I ask?—brother, perhaps?" inquires the little doctor, peering inquisitively, though under difficulties—for the abundant wind is playing rude tricks with the flame of his candle—into St. John's sad brown face.

"No—none."

"Well, then, to be candid with you, it *does* look rather serious," he answers, with the careless deliberate calmness which those whose half-life is spent in pronouncing death-warrants seem insensible to acquire: "a sharp attack of inflammation of the lungs, brought on by neglect and exposure. By-the-by, can you inform me whether

there is any predisposition to lung-disease in Miss—Miss Craven's family?"

"I know nothing about her family," replies the other, gloomily. He has no reason, beyond the probability of the thing, for supposing that she had ever had a father or mother, much less a grandfather or grandmother. Mr. Brand retires, completely mystified; and St. John, re-entering his room, throws himself into an arm-chair, and, covering his face with his hands, sends up violent voiceless prayers for the young life that is exchanging the first passes with that skilfulest of fencers, whom the nations have christened "Death!" In all his rough godless life he has had small faith in the efficacy of prayer; but, on the bare chance of there being some good in it, he prays wordlessly in his stricken heart for her.

Before they have done with him, the inmates of Blessington Hall have grown very familiar with Dr. Brand's face; night and morning, night and morning,

coming and going, coming and going, through many days; for the adversary with whom the child is wrestling has thrown many a better and stouter than she—and the battle is bitter. It is of little use now that she hate the shadowing ginger curtains of the vast old wooden four-poster: there must she lie, through all the weary twenty-four hours, in paroxysms of acutest pain, in fits of utter breathlessness, in agonies of thirst. Grief for Jack, love for St. John, shamed concern at Miss Blessington's damaging story and insulting words, are all swallowed up in the consuming craving for something to wet her parched lips, to cool her dry throat—something to drink! something to drink! By-and-by, with the pain, she becomes light-headed — wanders a little—"babbles of green fields;" babbles to the uninterested ears of the sleepy tired nurse, of the twisted seat under the old cherry-tree, of the tea-roses up the kitchen-garden walk, of the yellow

chickens in the rickyard. Then her delirium grows wilder: the green flabby Cupids on the walls come down out of the tapestry, and make at her. One, that is riding on a lion and blowing a horn, with fat cheeks puffed out, comes riding at her—riding up the bed-quilt, riding over her. Then the black and gold cocks on the old japan-chest, that, with neck-feathers ruffled, and heads lowered, stand ever, in act to fight, change their attitude; come pecking, pecking at her—pecking at her eyes; and she, with terrified hands stretched out, fights at them—thrusts them away.

"And thrice the double twilights rose and fell,
About a land where nothing seemed the same,
At morn or eve, as in the days gone by."

And it comes to pass, that there falls a day when these sick fancies pass—when the pain and breathlessness pass—and when Esther lies in utter exhaustion, weak as a day-old babe, whiter than any Annunciation lily, between her sheets.

Eyes and ears and power of touch are still hers: but it seems as though all objects of sensation, of sight and sound and touch, reach her only through a thick blanket. She can see, as if at an immense distance off, shrouded in mist, the faces of doctor and nurse as they lean over her, and then, turning away, whisper together. She cannot hear what they say; she has no wish to hear—she has no wish for anything; only she lies, staring, with great eyes, straight before her at the bed-hangings, at the ceiling, at the little countless pigeon-holes in her toilet-table. One of the windows is open; and heaven's sweet breath circulates fresh and slow through the quiet room.

It is Sunday; the village people are clustering about the church-door; the violets, like blue eyes that have slept through winter's night, are opening under the churchyard wall. The bells are ringing; now, loud and clear—"ding-dong bell! ding-dong bell!" almostas if they were being

rung in the still chamber itself—they come; now, faint and far; the wind has caught the sound in his rough hand, and carried it otherwhither. Whether they ring loud or faint, whether they ring or ring not at all, she has no care; she has no care for anything. She is very weary: it seems as if there were but a faint life-spark left in her; she can scarce lift her hand to her head. Now and then they raise her up, and, without asking her consent, pour brandy and beef-tea down her reluctant throat. She is *so* tired! Oh! why cannot they leave her alone? The slow hours roll themselves round; the people have gone into church, and have come out again.

Mr. Brand is here still; he is entering at the door; he is leaning over her. What can he have to say that he must needs look so solemn over? "My dear Miss Craven," he begins, with slow distinctness, as if he imagined that her illness had carried away her powers of hearing,

"Mr. Winter is here; would not you like to see him?"

Mr. Winter is the meek M.A., whose voice the old squire drowns.

She fixes her great eyes,

"Yet larger through her leanness,"

upon his face—wondering as a child's just opened upon this strange green world. "I—why should I?" she asks, in a faint astonished whisper. She cannot speak above a whisper.

The good man looks embarrassed. "You are very ill," he says, indirectly.

"Am I?"

"And people in your situation generally wish for the holy offices of a minister of the Church."

"Do they?" She is too feeble to join one link to another in the simplest chain of reasoning. She has failed to grasp his meaning. He looks baffled, uneasy.

"My dear young lady," he says, very gravely, "it is very painful for me to have

such a sad task to perform; but I cannot reconcile it with my conscience not to tell you that, in all human probability, you have not many more days to live."

Through the thick veil of her weakness and its attendant apathy pierces the sting of that awful news: her eyes dilate in their horror and fear, and she falls to weeping, feebly and helplessly.

"Don't say that—it is not true. How unkind you are! I don't want to die; I'm so young! I have had so little pleasure!"

"We must submit to God's will," says the doctor, a little tritely. It is so easy to submit to God's will towards one's friends and acquaintance.

She does not answer, but raises her hands with difficulty to her wasted face, while the tears trickle hot and frequent through that poor white shield.

"Have you any relations that you would like to have sent for?" inquires Mr. Brand, not unkindly; stooping over her, rather moved, but not very much so.

Often before has it been his portion to say, to youth and maid and stalwart man, "Thou must die!"

"I have no relations," she answers, almost inaudibly.

"Any friends?"

"I have no friends."

"You have, then, no wish to see any one?"

"No. Stay," she says, as he turns to leave her, reaching out her hand to detain him; "are you *quite* sure that I shall die?" (Her lips quiver, and a slight shudder passes over her form, as she utters the words, "Is it *quite* certain?")

"It is impossible to be *quite* certain in any case," he answers, slowly; "while there is life, there is hope, you know; but—but—I cannot buoy you up with a false confidence."

She lies quiet a moment or two, regathering her spent strength. "How long do you think I shall live?"

"It is impossible to say exactly," he

replies, gravely. "A few days—a few hours; one cannot be certain which."

Again she is silent, exhausted with the slight effort of framing a sentence. "Ask Mr. Gerard to come and see me—*now—at once—before I die!*"

He looks at her in astonishment, with a half-suspicion that she is light-headed; but her eyes look back at him with such perfect sanity in their clear depths, that he must needs abandon that idea. He cannot choose but undertake her commission at her bidding.

And St. John comes. They are singing the "Nunc Dimittis," which, saith Bacon, "is ever the sweetest canticle" in the Church, as he crosses the threshold of that room, and draws near that bed on which, but a few short nights ago, he had seen her, with his covetous lover's eyes, lying in all her round dimpled beauty. There comes no greeting blush *now* into her cheeks—the cheeks, that the sound of his far-off footfall had been wont to

redden. How can she, that is the affianced of great Death, blush for any *mortal* lover? Her eyes lift themselves languidly to his face; and, even in the "valley of the shadow," dwell there comfortably; though in that countenance—never beautiful, and now made haggard by watching, with reddened eyelids and quivering muscles—a stranger would have seen small comeliness.

"So I am going to die, they tell me!" she says, whisperingly—says it simply and mournfully.

Gerard cannot answer; only he flings himself forward upon the bed, and devours her thin hand with miserable kisses.

"Perhaps it is not true! Oh, I hope it is not, St. John!" she says, falling to weeping; in her feebleness and great dread of that goal to which all our highways and byways and field-paths lead:

"Death, and great darkness after death!"

Still no answer.

"Cannot they do anything for me?" she asks, piteously.

He lifts his head; and in his eyes—the eyes that have not wept more than twice since he was a little white-frocked child—stand heavy burning tears.

"Nothing, darling, I'm afraid," he answers, in a rough choked voice.

"There is *no* hope, then?"

"Oh, poor little one! why do you torture me with such questions? I *dare* not tell you a lie!"

"You mean that I am *sure* to die?" she says, faintly, with a slight shudder, while a look of utter hopeless fear comes into her wan face.

He throws his arms about her in his great despair. "Why do you make me tell you such news *twice?* Is not *once* enough?"

"It is *quite* sure! Oh, I wish I was not so frightened!"

His features contract in the agony of that moment; an overpowering tempta-

tion assails him, to tell her some pleasant falsehood about her state; but he resists it.

"As far as anything human *can* be sure, it is so," he says, turning away his head.

"Are you sure there is no mistake?—is it *quite* certain?"

"Quite."

"Then"—essaying to raise herself in the bed, and reaching out her slight, weary arms to him—"then kiss me, St. John!"

Without a word he gathers her to his breast; fully understanding, in his riven heart, that this embrace, which she herself can ask for, must indeed be a final one; his lips cling to hers in the wild silence of a solemn last farewell.

"I'm glad you are not angry with me now," she whispers, almost inaudibly; and then her arms slacken their clasp about his bronzed neck, and her head droops heavy and inert on his shoulder.

And so they find them half an hour

later: he, like one crazed, with a face as ashen-white as her own, clasping a lifeless woman to his breast.

CHAPTER XIV.

LIFELESS! Yes! But there are two kinds of lifelessness: one from which there is no back-coming—one from which there is. Esther's is the latter. Although a member of that fraternity whose province it is to kill and to make alive has sapiently said of her, "She will die!—she has not a week to live!" Mother Nature has made answer, "She shall *not* die; I will save her alive! She has yet many years." And Esther lives. For many days, it is hard to predicate of her whether she be dead or alive; so faintly does the wave of life heave to and fro in her breast—so lowly does life's candle burn. But though the candle burn low, it is not blown out. By-

and-by strength gathers itself again, and comes back to pulse and vein and limb.

At seventeen life holds us so fast in his embrace that he will hardly let us go. To the sick child there come sweet sleeps; there comes a desire for food—a pleasure in the dusty sunbeam streaming through the window—in the mote playing up and down on ceiling and wall. I marvel will the bliss of spirits at the Resurrection dawn, feeling the clothing of pure new bodies, surpass the delight that attends the renewal of the old body at the uprising from a great sickness? The blanket that hung between Esther and all objects of sensation is withdrawn: full consciousness returns, and remembrance; and in their company, untold shame—shame at not having died! The celandine's greenish buds are unclosing into little brazen wide-awake flowers in the hedge-banks: the crocuses in the garden-borders hold up their gold chalices to catch the gentle February rain and the mild February sun-

beams; in the wood-hollows the mercury —spring's earliest herald—flourishes, thick and frequent, its stout green shoots. About the meadows, small gawky lambs make a feeble "ba-a-a-ing." It is drawing towards sundown. The window is open; and near it, on a beech bough, a thrush sits, singing a loud sweet evensong.

Esther has been fully dressed for the first time, and has been moved into an adjoining dressing-room. In the small change of scene, there is, to her, intense delight — delight even in the changed pattern on the walls, in the different shape of the chairs—even in the brass handles of the old oak chest of drawers. Every power seems new and fresh—every sensation exquisitely keen; in every exercise of sight and sound and touch there is conscious joy. She has been amusing herself making little tests of her strength. She lifts a book that lies on the table beside her; it is small and light, but to her it seems

over-heavy; she has to take two hands to it. She makes a pilgrimage from her arm-chair to the window—she has to catch at the wall, at the furniture, for support; but she gets there at last, and, sitting down on the window-seat, looks out at the quiet sky, blackened with home-coming rooks—at the pool made flame-red by the westering sun—at the peeping roof of the distant deer-barn. That little bit of roof brings a flood of recollections to her, and first and foremost amongst them stands St. John and her last interview with him. Although she is quite alone, a torrent of red invades cheeks and throat and brow, even to the roots of her hair. "*I sent for him*," she says to herself, with a sort of gasp; "*I asked him to kiss me*, and *I did not die!* How horrible! I must never see him again." Then she falls to thinking about him: whether he is still in the house? whether he has made up his differences with Miss Blessington? whether he is very joyful at her own recovery?

whether he is not penetrated with the ridiculousness of her impressive leave-taking, which, after all—oh bathos!—was no leave-taking at all? "He must never hear me mentioned again," she says, twisting her hands nervously together. "Perhaps he will forget it in time; perhaps he will not tell any one about it. How soon shall I be well enough to go?—in a week? five days? four? three?—and whither am I to go?"

Aye, whither, Miss Craven? There are but two alternatives for her — the Union and Plas Berwyn. She must swallow her pride, and return to the Brandons: to the long prayers; to the half-past-six tea and bread and scrape; to the three bits of bacon at breakfast; and to the perusal of the *Record* and the *Rock*: she must induce Mrs. Brandon again to advertise for a situation in a pious family. This morning's post has brought her four pages of doctrine, reproof, and instruction from Miss Bessy, and, lurking within

them, has come a short, sweet, metrical prayer, adapted to every Christian's daily use:

> "My heart is like a rusty lock,
> Lord, oil it with Thy grace;
> And rub, and rub, and rub it, Lord,
> Till I can see Thy face."

There is no time like the present; she will write now. She has drawn paper and pens towards her, when the door opens, and her friend the housemaid enters. Doctor and nurse have fled,

> "Like bats and owls,
> And such melancholy fowls,
> At the rising of the day."

"If you please, Miss Craven, do you feel well enough to see visitors?"

She looks up astonished. "I'm well enough for anything; but I'm sure I don't know who is likely to visit me."

"Mr: Gerard was asking whether he might speak to you 'm?"

"Certainly not—I mean yes—No.—Yes,

I suppose—if he wishes," replies the girl, stammering hopelessly.

Miss Craven looks rather small, and excessively childish, sunk in her huge elbow-chair; a white wrapper envelopes her figure; her hair, which she has not taken the trouble to dress properly, is twisted up in the loosest, unfashionablest, sweetest great knot at the back of her neck; while a cherry-coloured ribbon coquettishly snoods her noble small head: the innocentest, freshest, shyest rosebud-face, and the liquidest southern eyes, complete the picture. St. John apparently treads hard upon the heels of the messenger, for, before permission is well accorded him, he is in his mistress' presence. Upon his brown face is untold gladness—in his eyes enormous love; and in them lurks also a look of half-malicious, half-tender mirth. She rises, and then sits down again, in unutterable confusion; and at length holds out her hand with distant diffidence to him, while as intense a blush as ever

made mortal woman call upon the hills to cover her, bathes every inch of her that is visible. Her cheeks feel like gigantic red globes, over which her eyes have difficulty in looking. *His* eyes, laughing, pitiless, yet impassioned, refuse to leave her.

"You did not give me so cold a greeting when I last saw you, Essie?" he says, with an enraging smile of passionate triumph.

She turns away her head, and covers her face with both hands; but, in the interstices between her fingers, the lovely carnation blazes manifestly vivid.

"Oh, don't—don't be so cruel!" she murmurs, in a stifled voice.

"The truth can never be cruel!" he says quietly, smiling still; and so kneels down on the floor beside her.

But she only murmurs, "Go away; *please* go away! please let me alone!"—the words coming half-broken, half-lost, from behind the covering of her hands,

He puts up his, and tries to draw away the screen from her shamed discomfited face, saying, "Look at me, Essie!" But she, with all her feeble strength, resists.

"I cannot! — I cannot!" she cries, vehemently; "don't ask me! Why didn't I die? When they saw I was getting well, they ought to have killed me. Oh, I wish they had!"

"I'm rather glad, on the whole, they did not," he answers, gravely; and so, with one final effort, he being strong, and she being weak, he obtains possession of her two hands, and her face lies bare, unshaded—dyed with an agony of shame —clothed with great beauty — under the hungry tenderness of his happy eyes.

"To think of making one's last dying speech and confession, and then not dying after all," she says, in torments of confusion, yet unable to restrain an uneasy laugh. "It is *too* disgraceful! I shall

never get over it! *Never!*—NEVER!—NEVER!!"

"Time, which mitigates all afflictions, *may* mitigate yours," he replies, gaily, unable to resist the exquisite pleasure of teasing her.

She turns from him with a petulant movement of head and shoulder. "Why don't you go?" she cries, the angry tears flashing into her eyes; "I hate the sight of you!"

At that he grows grave. "Essie," he says, slipping his arms round her as she sits, shrinking away from him in the deep chintz chair, "in that awful moment, when you thought—and God knows I thought so too—that we were saying 'goodbye' to one another for *always*, the barriers that your wretched false pride had built up between us were knocked down; try as you may, you can never build them up again."

"I knocked down plenty of barriers,

I'm aware," she answers, ruefully. "You need not remind me of that!"

"Never to be built up again any more—never any more!" he says, his mirth swallowed up in great solemn joy.

She has fallen forwards into his embrace; he holds her little trembling form against his heart—a posture to which she submits, chiefly because it affords her an opportunity of hiding her face upon his shoulder.

"Never any more!" she repeats, mechanically, and then there is silence, save for the thrush, that trills ever his high tender lay. Presently Essie stirs, and whispers, with uneasiness, "St. John!"

"Well?"

"You won't tell any one, will you?"

"Tell them what?—that you and I are going to be married? By this time to-morrow I hope to have told every one I meet: I am not so selfish as to wish to keep such good news to myself."

"No—I don't mean that; but you won't

tell any one about—about—about *that?*" This is the nearest approach she can bear to make to the abhorred theme.

"Esther!"

"And you'll promise never to joke about it?"

"*Never*, by the holy poker!"

"And you won't twit me with it when we quarrel?"

"What! you contemplate our having little differences of opinion?"

"Of course," she answers, laughing; "when two such ill-tempered people come together, how can it be otherwise?"

"Quarrel or no quarrel," he cries, passionately kissing her sweet shy lips, as one that can never be satiated with their tender warmth, "we are together now, for bad and good, for fair weather and foul, till death us do part! Say it after me, Essie: don't let ours be a one-sided compact."

And Essie, obedient, murmurs after him, "Till death us do part!"

* * * * *

And so it comes to pass that in the sweet spring weather, when the ground is a carpet of strewn cherry-blooms, when the cows stand knee-deep in buttercups; and the brake-fern is uncrumpling its tender fronds, the church-bells ring out, and they two are wed.

And the sun, that shines down on the bravery of the wedding pomp, as bride and groom pace by, shines also hotlier, with a more brazen sickly glare, on a soldier's grave, over which, three days ago, his comrades fired the parting volley on Bermuda's sultry shore.

The name of the soldier to whom Heaven has granted his discharge is Robert Brandon. Esther Gerard may spare her remorse now; treachery of hers can wound that loyal heart, on which the worm feeds sweetly, never more! Not unknowing of the good fortune of the woman he had so madly, miserably, nobly loved, has he passed away. In his poor schoolboy scrawl

he had written her a little simple, badly-worded note, bidding "God bless and speed her on her way!" The tears had fallen hot and thick upon the paper; but he had wiped them off, and she had never guessed them. He has hoarded his scant pay, has denied himself many of the small comforts that to his brother-officers are bare necessaries of life, that he may send her a wedding-gift befitting Gerard's bride. And he had gone about his wonted ways with no moping martyr's airs, unshaken in his simple creed that, since God wills it, all must be for the best. His honest laugh, if it come seldomer than it used, yet is none the less hearty and genial when it does come. And then, that pestilence which, at stated seasons, never forgetting its appointed periods, visits that tropic clime, comes and lays its heavy hand on the shoulder of many a fair-haired youth; and, among the first, upon the *stalwart shoulder of* Robert Brandon. And he, with no life-hating madness, with no

quarrel against fate, yet not all unwilling, having stoutly fought life's hard battle:

"Surrenders his fair soul
Unto his Captain—Christ!"

THE END.

LONDON:
Printed by A. Schulze, 13, Poland Street.

00075732

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018